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Not all trees are timber: looking past the ontology of American homeownership through the lens of Detroit

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NOT ALL TREES ARE TIMBER

***LOOKING PAST THE ONTOLOGY OF AMERICAN HOMEOWNERSHIP
THROUGH THE LENS OF DETROIT***



Conor McKay Allerton

April 27, 2018

Senior Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Bachelor of Arts in Urban Studies
Vassar College

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I also want to acknowledge the Land on which this thesis was written, and on which this work was conducted. The Land on which Poughkeepsie now stands was originally inhabited by the Lenape, Mahican, and Wappinger peoples. The Land on which Detroit stands was originally inhabited by the Anishinabek, Miami, Odawa, Peoria, and Potawatomi peoples. These Lands were violently colonized by European settlers, a legacy which remains equally as violent today. These peoples do not exist only in our past, but are very much here, still living within the settler-colonial framework that pervades and defines our society today.

1. INTRODUCTION

The great American homestead. Expanding west on the heels of divine exploration, with God at your back, nothing will resist your settling of the land you want. What better way to show the world what is now yours than a house, a manifestation of sweat and blood that one day, if you are lucky, may become a home. Family, children, a blazing hearth at its core, fueling your American drive to succeed in the harshest circumstances. You are the American Dream, and no one will tell you otherwise. Your house and your land are your power, your capital, your identity, your way of being, and you are nothing without them.

This is a familiar story, perhaps less dramatic today, but held in lore as strongly as if it still defined the experience of the average American. When the United States was settled, it was settled with the house and the home, the great differentiator between the modern and the wild, the settled and the uninhabited, the conqueror and the conquered. The narrative that erased what Indigenous civilizations came before the European settler, pervaded through the slave trade, industrialization, suburbanization, into today's urban era. American homeownership and property ideology is built into the psychological and physical foundations of this nation, molding more of our society and very *ontology* than we could ever imagine, much less what we are told.

Today, housing is yet another one of many basic human rights that is far from adequately accessible. Water, food, education, and others are all in jeopardy, and perhaps they are all to some extent connected to housing inequality in this country. Afterall, a modern citizen cannot live without shelter, let alone prosper. Yet there are tens of thousands of homeless in most major American cities, and countless more living in perpetual housing insecurity. Since 2008, eviction

and foreclosure rates have hit epidemic levels, and those who are losing their rights are still blamed. American ideology tells us that independence is key, and if you find yourself in precarity, you are the only one at fault. Welfare to any extent is stigmatized as un-American, and even what public programs we do have are consistently being defunded or entirely abandoned. It is safe to say that homeownership is out of the reach of millions of Americans, while any form of housing security is no guarantee.

It cannot be overstated that this is a racialized issue. Housing is clearly an issue of socioeconomic status, but with that comes a link to racial discrimination perhaps more potent. Founded in Indigenous genocide and sustained through slavery, racial discrimination in housing rights is a defining characteristic of our very conceptions of property and homeownership. It is through this history of White Supremacy and systemic racial oppression that we see the most stark housing inequality in the United States, rental abuse, segregation, and gentrification all directly attacking the country's Black and Brown urban communities. Of course, it is important to recognize that among these housing landscapes, through history and today, is a similarly systemic oppression based on gender and sexuality. This must be addressed, but in this piece, I plan to focus primarily on race.

There are a lot of reasons why I am writing this. Growing up in New York City, I have witnessed firsthand a visible housing inequality for my whole life, one that is only getting worse today as Brooklyn, Queens, and Harlem are all facing violent displacement. Through my college career I have sought to learn as much as I can about these situations, why public housing has come short so many times, why cities refuse to protect their marginalized communities, and why this all goes relatively overlooked. I am at a point now that I understand how deeply these

problems go, that there is no easy solution, and that an honest confrontation would require an overhaul of our capitalist system as we know it. White Supremacy floods every aspect of our society, and our ideology, how we see property and homeownership, is inherently flawed. Addressing such fundamental problems may seem hopeless, and I am to an extent hopeless. But this project is a way for me to look closer, to spend time on broad histories and specific scenarios, how some are confronting housing inequality and property ideology, because they feel inclined to do so or are forced to in order to survive. I hope to find distinction between the *house* as a physical structure, and the *home* as an idea, a psychological manifestation of our ontology. Which word I choose to use is very intentional, because the two are in no way interchangeable.

Detroit has blown my mind wide open. I first arrived in Detroit in the spring of 2016 during my sophomore year, as a part of a college class focused around the city, which culminated in a ten day trip to Detroit. Our professor, Tyrone Simpson, took us across the city to meet with countless grassroots activists and community organizers, all invested entirely in the host of social problems that saturated the city. More or less that trip allowed me to understand what I want to do after school, and sparked the idea to pursue this project. So I decided to return during the winter of 2017, to see what more I could learn, and possibly to reconnect with some of the people I had met a year and a half earlier. I am writing this because of the people I have met in Detroit, because of Tyrone, and because of how much I have seen people accomplish with far fewer resources. It is a logical next step, and I am more than excited to do it.

My main question is hard to define, but I would say it is along the lines of: How can we look past traditions of superficial housing reform, and confront the systems of oppression that perpetuate housing inequality at the root? How can we subvert our capitalist view of property

and our racialized obsessions with homeownership through alternative forms of housing, based in entirely different values? How can we center collectivism, humanism, and community in how we live? And how can we abolish our idea of private property altogether, and instead see the land as the commons that it is? I hope to be able to be able to formulate some sort of answers by the end, or at least understand where to go from here.

A note: The photos (aside from maps and data) incorporated into this project were all taken by me during my trips to Detroit in 2016 and 2017.

2. CONTEXT

HOMEBUILDING AND FOUNDATIONS OF NATIONALISM

Before we can discuss housing inequality today in the United States faces today, or to even comprehend the implications of it, we must look to its foundations. The house, the home, and the ideologies since associated, have roots buried in the nation's colonial founding. Intentions of othering, of reinstating a predetermined power, lie in the very beginning of White presence in North America. In their first actions within the New World, colonists sought to establish a dominance over the land, to enforce the imperial motivations of their explorations on this newly conquered land.

What started as shelters constructed for survival quickly evolved into symbols of dominance, investment, a sense of permanence; "They represented, furthermore, a decisive grip on land, a solid entrenchment in the continent. Houses were a proof of civilization; conversely, poor shelters were an index to colonial failure."¹ The erected house inherently meant more than shelter for the colonist; in time it would become a symbol of the difference between us and them, the critical separation that would inevitably justify the colonization of a continent. But for now, the house was an expression of civilization, of strength, and of right, both colonial and sacred.

For the Puritan population of early British colonists, "architectural structures were a microcosm of God's exacting structure for the universe and a constant reminder of the way He

¹ Jan Cohn, *The Palace or the Poorhouse: The American House as a Cultural Symbol* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1979), 5.

wanted them to live.”² Even before an established religious presence in the built environment, the house symbolized the divine nature of the colonizer: the obligation bestowed by God to settle this land for the purpose of implementing social and structural purity in this “wild” place. As colonization took fuller form, Puritan settlers “carefully created an environment in which the houses and towns reflected their concepts about a divinely ordained structure for family relations and social life.”³ Already, notions of the family in relation to the home, pivotal social dynamics brought from Europe take hold in the colonies, later to be developed into full nationalist ideologies.

Once the settler’s house was established, the foundations built into the earth and the first permanent marks of colonialism made, housing dynamics continued to simultaneously mirror and influence the evolution of American society, alongside the development of American capitalism, overtime. Once the transatlantic slave trade is underway, the home must be cherished as a White right, “the symbol of civilization’s progress,” and most importantly for its “symbolic value as [a sign] of a man’s freedom and status as a citizen.”⁴ The influx of African slaves into the colonies brings complexity to the housing landscape. The plantation finds its roots in capitalist ownership; “land itself was property, the land constituted the wealth of the owner; the great house elegantly capped that property. As Vincent Scully has said in reference to Jefferson’s Monticello, this house ‘is about a man owning the earth.’”⁵ The dichotomy between the big house and the slave quarters is now a physical distinction of status by race, performing the same purpose as the original settler house. There was no room to express Black culture

² Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983) 3-4.

³ Wright, 5.

⁴ Cohn, 39.

⁵ Cohn, 18-19.

through the home; the home. Slave quarters “represented dominant White attitudes about Black domesticity, Black sexuality, and Black standards of character cleanliness.”⁶ European ideology of domesticity was imposed upon Black slaves.

HOMEOWNERSHIP AS AMERICAN CAPITALISM

Through generations, across eras of war, depression, and rebirth, settler-colonial ideologies not only take hold on the newly unifying American identity, but they shape it, construct shared perspectives of domestic and international, of who belongs and who does not. These values continue to be fine-tuned as political, economic, and cultural landscapes alter, but during certain periods in American history core ideology was arguably best defined and reinforced by the house and the home. Particularly after the Industrial revolution, when housing was seen as an afterthought to production and job security, radical responses to the harsh living conditions of this area led to an extreme movement back to the roots of America, back to the countryside. Here, in the first phases of suburbanization, the bases of American values could be found: independence, self-sufficiency, family, grit, and the land to show for it.

The pathway was clear for the White urbanite. The city was overcrowded, dirty, ideologically murky, and threatening to the state. Suburbanization in the United States was a deliberate shift back to ideological control. The goal was not to separate from the industriousness of the city, but to isolate the family and the livelihood of the capable American from the dark alleys of the factory and the inhabitants of them. Industry allowed for suburbanization: a modern infrastructure project conducted by the state. Suburbanization

⁶ Wright, 57.

encompassed numerous interests such as the shift to the private automobile as the primary form of transportation, the massive job creating endeavor of a national highway system, and the inevitable boom in the construction industry, among others. But above all, suburbanization had an ideological incentive. As Charles P Neill has written, “Home, above all things, means privacy. It means the possibility of keeping your family off from other families. There must be a separate house, and as far as possible, separate rooms, so that at an early period of life the idea of rights to property, the right to things, to privacy, may be instilled.”⁷ Furthermore,

On an individual level, they represented personal independence. On a social level, they showed family pride and self-sufficiency. Politically, the architecture seemed an expression of democratic freedom of choice. And economically, it mirrored the pattern of private enterprise, rather than planning for the overall public good, which characterized American society.⁸

These values spanned all aspects of life, perpetuating already established notions of American identity, but in their widespread manifestation within the built environment, would become ingrained in the American mind.

The distinction between house and home at this point is being blurred; the two are conflated, and the house in turn becomes the home. This is perhaps the most insidious quality of suburban homeownership, a “profound cultural significance beyond that associated with economic success and the acquisition of property. In the privately-owned house exists the American home.”⁹ Here, “House and home coexist; home flourishes most successfully in the privately owned, detached, single-family dwelling.”¹⁰ Through pervasive propagating of housing thought, in collaboration with significant economic incentive, the suburban house becomes the

⁷ Wright, 126.

⁸ Wright, 89.

⁹ Cohn, 223.

¹⁰ Cohn, 223.

standard living condition in the United States. The process of suburbanization was “neither natural nor inevitable,” providing a sanctuary for White middle and upper class citizens while wage laborers, immigrants, and People of Color remained stuck in the overcrowded, deadly living conditions of the city.¹¹ American capitalist ideology of the home, as in the colonial beginnings of the country, made clear once again who this land belonged to.

While most values enforced by suburban homeownership existed prior to the suburbanization movement, one that was arguably realized in its wake was that of the nuclear family. Ideals around a family household, expected interpersonal relationships, domestic roles, and corresponding exclusion and condemnation of alternative social dynamics. The house always represented the hard work and success of the man, but also “extended to create an expression of [his] family’s unique individuality,”¹² manifesting not only the individuality of the man but the unity of his family. Here the family becomes an extension of the father and husband, with designated roles for each member. While the wife and daughters provide domestic support, “the son learns the virtues of industry and thrift, virtues for which the house itself is the tangible reward. The American inheritance, then, is the house as a model, a lesson, an incentive.”¹³ The importance of the family, the passing down of American values, and the inheritance of acquired capital, all culminates in the nuclear family and the home. This structure inhibits any sort of inheritance, value sharing, or ideological influence to pervade across different families, eliminating potential for alternative thought or anything collective action outside parents and children.

¹¹ Margaret Garb, *City of American Dreams: A History of Home Ownership and Housing Reform in Chicago, 1871-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 1.

¹² Cohn, 214.

¹³ Cohn 215.

Simultaneously, what this dynamic also promotes is a closely knit support network, particularly in the face of capitalist pressures on the individual. “Our cultural emphasis on individual competitiveness, with its consequences in potential hostilities between fellow beings, fears, and diminished self-esteem, provokes a strong need for affection,”¹⁴ subsequently a pressure on the family to support these insecurities that would not naturally be needed. This dynamic, designed to balance out the unnatural stress encircling competition throughout a capitalist society, does not recognize itself as such a fundamental response, and thus results often in overwhelming of the intended support network. Larger communal support networks could provide a distribution of responsibility, but these are instead internally antagonized. These values of competition and individual responsibility are then extended to the family, so that “in customary American fashion the responsibility for not making a mistake is passed back onto the individual and his family, with the assumption implicit that the deserving families can find through successful home ownership the road out from poor housing.”¹⁵ This familial responsibility is clearly implemented to explain the racial inequalities among suburban and urban housing, but even pervade those who are meant to benefit from this framework; the strict responsibility of the family to earn suburban homeownership comes with harsh consequences. This leaves the family to blame no one but each other and themselves, lending to consistent overwhelming pressure that are arguably directly connected to trends of divorce, domestic abuse, and other interfamilial conflicts. Thus while the nuclear family structure enforced through housing ideals has successfully propagated core American values, it has covertly presented intense ramifications felt by most every American family.

¹⁴ John Dean, *Home Ownership: Is It Sound?* (New York City: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1945), 10.

¹⁵ Dean, 159.

MODERN AMERICAN HOUSING IDEOLOGY INTRODUCED

Recognizing the colonial legacy and spatial infrastructure is essential to understanding the role of American housing ideology in today's landscape. The house is meant to physically establish the unique modernity of the European colonist among both Native Americans and Black Americans of the New World; the value of the home and its ownership perpetuates this forced separation, recreating images of barbarism and a divine superiority that inculcated in colonial society. Instilling such a pervasive and multifaceted mindset requires constant and aggressive indoctrination.

Since the first European settling of North America, development occurred along a typical colonial path, spreading as quickly and efficiently as possible, driven by violence and technological advancement. Housing landscapes evolved in the same way: slowly growing west and densifying into cities still in existence today. American settlers of the 19th century essentially mimicked the development tactics familiar to their European roots, driven by Manifest Destiny, the divine duty to expand westward. From the lens of housing development, the pathway of the United States would culminate in the American Industrial Revolution, where industrial technology and the capitalist incentive to manufacture in excess would encroach on American values as fundamental as individualist property ownership. The extreme living circumstances of the industrial city caused a massive exodus, retreating back to nature to return to the roots of American agrarian living. This prompted a housing revolution resulting in our modern day suburbs. But through this exodus, with the motivation of industrial urban horror illustrated in both fact and myth, the same values represented in early settler housing and

foundations of the home were reintroduced in a capacity more pervasive and unquestioned than ever before.

American suburbanization did not quite return to previous agrarian living, but sought to capture values of private property and individualism within a modern landscape, creating a new, rather synthetic ideal. The detached, rural, single-family home symbolized a reproduction of lost national values.¹⁶ Individually they represented “personal independence;” socially, “family pride and self-sufficiency;” politically, “democratic freedom of choice;” and economically, “it mirrored the pattern of private enterprise, rather than planning for the overall public good, which characterized American society.”¹⁷ Privatization of business and manufacturing had been clearly established within the industrial city, replicating itself now in how Americans chose to live. The suburban home expressed individuality;¹⁸ a means of the patriarch to protect his family against the “wicked city;”¹⁹ but overall, a vessel for the perpetuation of key American ideology. As Charles P. Neill explains, “There must be a separate house, and as far as possible, separate rooms, so that at an early period of life the idea of rights to property, the right to things, to privacy, may be instilled.”²⁰ The suburban house in remarkable ways provides physical indicators of closely held beliefs that should be introduced from birth as not only pivotal to American identity but almost by means of fear, be never questioned. This not only created a strong sense of nationalism within the very architecture of American housing, but a widely

¹⁶ Wright, 89.

¹⁷ Wright, 89.

¹⁸ Cohn, 214.

¹⁹ Wright, 89.

²⁰ Wright, 100.

compliant population convinced of the preservation of democracy and personal freedom as saturated in the bricks of the house as in the words of the Bill of Rights.²¹

More than anything the era of suburbanization solidified homeownership in the American creed, and as one of only a few inaccessible routes to achieve the ever-elusive American Dream. The sudden mass availability of homes built to be owned “[made] available to a very great percentage of the population the status of property-owner, and thereby to establish a rough egalitarianism supportive of democratic ideals of America.”²² The Dream was now practically attainable to working class families, sparking irreparable support of homeownership as a “primitive totem” of American ideology. This was property earned and owned, a tangible ideal that antagonized anything different.

Within this newly established model of the house lives the home, the value system held by brick and mortar beyond economic success or property acquisition, with the cultural potency to perpetuate itself indefinitely.²³ The house and the home became the ultimate manifestation of acquired capital, not only representing the individuality of a family, but its own hard-earned success. Connecting generations, the value of a family, both internally and externally, is undetectably intertwined with their dwelling, as “a model, a lesson, an incentive. A set of abstract values to be realized in whatever physical dwelling the son may acquire.”²⁴

²¹ Cohn, 237.

²² Cohn, 243.

²³ Cohn, 223.

²⁴ Cohn, 215.

HOMEOWNERSHIP PROPAGANDA SOLIDIFIED

Fermented in the mid-20th century into American tradition, the model home presents the country's most persuasive and far-reaching propagandist tool. American nationalism hit peaks in a time of ideological insecurity, uncontrollable globalization, and growing disdain for the federal government's actions both at home and abroad. In order to maintain an ideally subdued population, policies addressing particularly housing and transportation, were set forth to ultimately ensure a homogenous and thus malleable citizenry. The model suburban home and all it represents iconically symbolizes this homogeneity, while synthetically reproducing a sense of individuality and choice needed to maintain a rhetoric of democracy. The resulting suburban design was predicated on the question, "How could Americans create an environment that protected the respect for order, self-sufficiency, and spirituality they held in common,²⁵ without imposing on the freedom of each individual and each family to live as they pleased?"²⁶ Calculated was a perfect balance of independence and conformity, manifesting a tangible American Dream for the White middle class, sturdily posited on the foundation of family.

This quickly became a national undertaking, with the potential of championing the American family into the modern era, and more importantly instilling a curated American identity into the very foundation of every home. Proposed by the highest positions in the government, "the goal was a general idea of the optimum setting for 'the typical American family'—still depicted as an independent yeoman farmer and his hardworking immediate kin."²⁷ The typical would be reintroduced as a modern, industrialized household fit for the same nuclear

²⁵ David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2012), 67-88.

²⁶ Wright, 74-75.

²⁷ Wright, 75-76.

family, in a contemporary suburban landscape. Notions of independence are still maintained in the separation between houses as well as clearly marked and owned land boundaries, but now in a much more regulated manipulated format. Personalization was especially emphasized in the ideal home, seeing as it was more than anything “a guide, an inspiration that each builder and each family would adapt to the circumstances at hand,” but always based in the detached cottage and residing family.²⁸ Potent narratives soon emerged, distributed fervently by the government as well as any industry profiting off of the massive development campaign. Blended with pre-existing values of family, property, and success, the suburban house offered Americans a return to their perceived roots; the house and the home became arguably the single most important asset of the American family. There was no other option, as “the suburban home seemed the only way to provide a good family life. This was what the government, the builders, the bankers, and the magazines told them, and many believed it—or felt they had to.”²⁹ However enforced, this was now the norm, and seeking the benefits of the new housing opportunity, no one who could drive out to the suburbs and purchase their own home and their own land, was going to challenge what they were told.

Not only granting access to a private living space, but suburbanization also reintroduced the prospect of owning the land you live on, a founding tenet of colonial American society resurfacing once again in the 20th century. The landlord dominated the urban landscape during the American Industrial Revolution, famously cramming tenants into windowless tenement buildings, without code or regulation to prevent the festering of inhumane, deadly living conditions. At the root of this conflict was a sense of vulnerability, an exploitation that can only

²⁸ Wright, 75.

²⁹ Wright, 258.

target the guests of a property. The renting role stripped these tenants of their basic rights, let alone any sense of dignity or success. Thus homeownership proposed a chance “to achieve freedom from landlords—the home owner is master of his dwelling. He can make alterations as he sees fit, and money spent for improvement adds to the value of his home as a property.”³⁰ Anti-rental sentiment could be tied into the encroachment of basic democracy, and a deeper understanding that “democracy is not a privilege; it is a responsibility, and human nature rarely volunteers to shoulder responsibility, but has to be driven by the whip that has proved, beyond all others, efficacious in driving men to discharge the duties of self-government.”³¹

Ultimately, the establishment of the model American house and the prioritization of homeownership were tied up in not only American nationalism, but intertwined belief systems seen to unify and strengthen popular support. The 20th century suburban family absorbed claims that “the right home environments could help assure the blessed eternal peace of ‘home comforts’ in heaven,”³² and that “socialism and communism do not take root in the ranks of those who have their feet firmly embedded in the soil of America through home ownership.”³³ Yet most dearly held to the emboldened hearts of the homeownership suburban family was the belief that “the men who have preserved the civil liberties of the English-speaking peoples have been the men with a stake in society.”³⁴ Your lot in Levittown carries the same patriotic weight as the stakes first implanted in American soil separating the gentlemen from the savages, the modern from the wild. The home, under White Supremacy,³⁵ was well intentioned for the White

³⁰ Dean, 16.

³¹ Dean, 3.

³² Wright, 75.

³³ Dean, 4.

³⁴ Dean, 3-4.

³⁵ See Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

man and the White man alone, to hold himself independent of his neighbor, his imperial prowess far from the marginalized, his big house away from the slave quarters.

BLACK HOMEOWNERSHIP

This speak of homeownership, an accessible American Dream materialized in the suburban house and perpetuated by an imposed culture of home and family, these trends must be analyzed under a strict racial and socioeconomic lens in order to fully understand the ways in which they influence American society. Rather overlooked until now in this writing, who these houses are built for, and whose dreams are granted, is a particular intersection of both racial privilege and economic access that automatically eliminates a vast majority of the population. What connects these eras, of early settler housebuilding, slave and slaveowner housing dynamics, and suburbanization is a fundamental dichotomy between have and have not: an ever consistent displacement of basic resources in order to concretely define and accentuate the benefit of being White and financially secure. The successes of these times and these places, of these ideas and these lives, are either explicitly or more covertly dependent on the disadvantage, exclusion, and exploitation of others. This narrative, a major artery of our collective story, is what connects the settler cottage to the plantation house to the farmhouse to the tenement to the suburban house to today. It is the backbone of this writing, and must be centered in this work as in any other study of American society.

In order to better understand conditions of the American industrial city, the tenement must be defined. This type of structure, emerged in the mid 19th century by a growing landlord class to essentially economize their business. “Usually three or four stories high, with two

families on each floor—including the damp, subterranean basement—and another building squeezed into the backyard, these residences offered only a minimum of space, light, and air.”³⁶ These conditions have been well documented, and lasted well into the 20th century, and arguably today. As the return to nature began and living ideals were realized in single family homes, authorities attempted to instill the same characteristics in urban areas. While “communal toilets, bathrooms, stairs, and laundries, borders within an apartment, and the multiple-family dwellings themselves harbored an association with communism,”³⁷ governmental bodies such as the Department of Labor insisted on uses of doorbells, private entrances, and bay windows on tenement buildings, since they echoed the single family home.”³⁸

On a larger urban scale, common methods such as redlining and blockbusting acted to concentrate mostly poor People of Color into neighborhoods then labeled “slums” or “blighted.” Yet these strategies were lightweight in comparison to racially restrictive covenants, “private contracts or agreements that the property would not be sold, leased, or rented to... whatever group local prejudice found undesirable.”³⁹ Federally backed policies such as these facilitated the exclusion of People of Color and other marginalized groups from setting foot in the suburbs, or branching out of neighborhoods allocated for them. The Federal Housing Administration (FHA), above all other organizations, codified this inequality of the urban landscape by refusing mortgage loans and mortgage insurances to only select families, establishing patterns of segregation left unsolved even until today.⁴⁰ The stability of a loan was interpreted solely by

³⁶ Wright, 117.

³⁷ Wright, 127.

³⁸ Wright, 127.

³⁹ Wilhelmina Leigh and James Stewart, *The Housing Status of Black Americans* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1991), 9.

⁴⁰ Wilhelmina Leigh and James Stewart, 10.

skin color; the system of raising quality of housing in the United States could not function without the concentration of poor People of Color and the demonization of those constructed neighborhoods.⁴¹

The 1949 Housing Act aimed to abolish racist housing policy, hoping to ensure access to “a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family.”⁴² As propagandist this outlook already is, structures were left untampered and unregulated, giving rise eventually to housing market crash as unequally distributed as any measure of wealth in this country. In the 21st century, rates of Black homeownership fall invisible to the approximated 75 percent of White families who own their homes today. It is estimated that discrimination within the housing and home financing markets have cost today’s Black American population around 82 billion dollars.⁴³ This all came to climax in 2007 and 2008, when years of widespread exploitation of people looking to finance homes, secure real estate as a viable asset, and finally approach that Dream they had once heard, resulted in a market crash that affected low-income People of Color in outrageously disproportionate numbers. If anything, the crash served to unveil one side of housing discrimination manifested, an intentional, widely practiced oppression only different from previous eras in its contemporary adaptation.⁴⁴

Before even approaching a discussion of the viability of widespread accessible homeownership, we must acknowledge that our values as a nation reflect narrow notions of individualism, capitalism, and chauvinism. Hand in hand with an American nationalist

⁴¹ See Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro, *Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality* (Philadelphia: Taylor and Francis, 1995).

⁴² Wright, 246.

⁴³ Gregory Squires and Charis Kubrin, *Privileged Places: Race, Residence, and the Structure of Opportunity* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006), 9.

⁴⁴ See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York City: The New Press, 2012).

orientation comes inherently a racial and socioeconomic prioritization of access to these indoctrinated dreams. As horrific as these inequalities are, they display the same cost-benefit matrix implemented any time within the last 300 odd years. As long as our living conditions are built and sustained for the White man, reinforcing patterns of alleged failure among marginalized groups facilitating the innocent antagonism of the concentrated poor, colonialist and imperialist mechanisms will thrive in the homes and the communities built in their image.

3. DETROIT

PART I



Above: Current Detroit population and property statistics. Only one third of the population is employed, the median household income is half of the national average, and the median property value is about a fifth of the national average. See <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/detroit-mi>.

As a major piece of this project, I have chosen to incorporate Detroit, to ground my thought and research in a tangible subject. I will include both historical and anecdotal writings, reflecting on the unique but microcosmic history and identity of the city, as well as my own time spent in Detroit over two periods. I visited the city first with a class in the Spring of 2016, and again in January 2018. Over both visits I centered my time around engaging with grassroots, non profit, and governmental efforts dedicated reviving the city through whichever means each group or individual felt necessary. I have encountered a host of opinions, often contradicting one another in an ongoing conflict over the future of the promising but vulnerable city. I will discuss what I have learned that is most relevant to the concerns of this project. This chapter will

include both professional and informal work, differing ideologies, and anecdotes of my personal experiences in Detroit that I feel are emblematic of greater patterns.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

I now bring us to our current existence and what we are most familiar with. What we have today is the product of our past, what we know of then and how it has shaped now. What we have discussed thus far are what I believe are important pieces of history to keep in the forefront of our minds as we address the issue of housing and homeownership that we face today. It is imperative to hold this memory throughout; the past will impact the present and future inevitably, our choice lies in whether or not it is intentional.

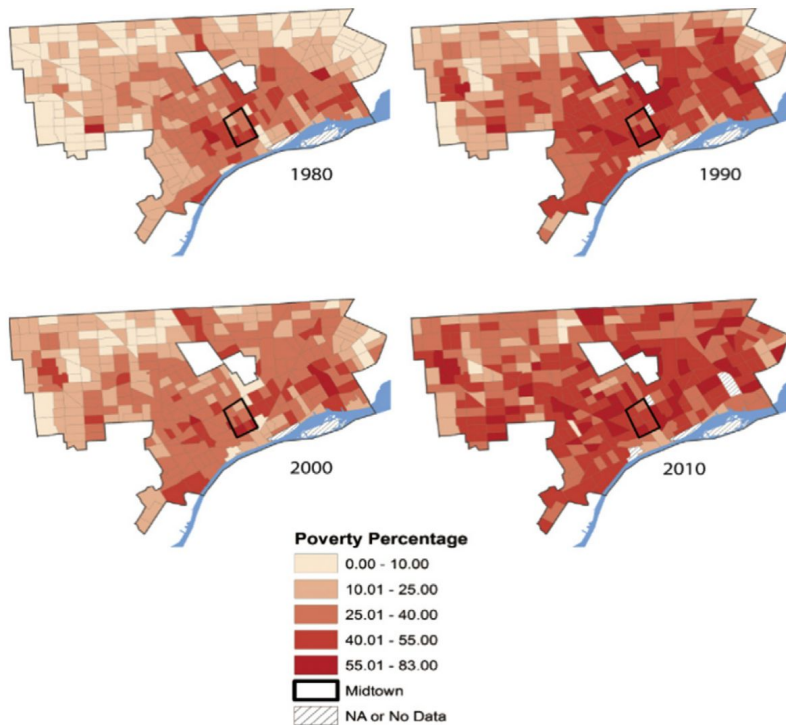
Our definitions of rural, suburban, and urban are part of a wide human trope of compartmentalization to better conceptualize the world around us. We cannot truly fathom the infinite or the fluid, but recognizing that these are present, influential, and can help us to see a complex distribution of dynamic relationships between our constructed compartments. With this in mind, we turn to Detroit, Michigan. I plan not to make any sweeping definitions of this city, but to look at important qualities of its history and pieces in today's fabric that can reveal new perspectives on not only Detroit and its inhabitants but the greater country, as in many ways this city particularly acts as a microcosm of the country as a whole.

Detroit as a city falls well within the Rust Belt of the Midwest and Northeast, a bastion of industrialization, and its ultimate collapse. There are a great number of industries concentrated within Detroit, most prominently by far the American automobile industry, championed by Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler. These three companies arguably lifted the city to the competitive

echelons of New York and Los Angeles, incentivizing waves of migrants from the South up North to find a work and a modernized lifestyle. These migrants, mostly Black, hit cities like Detroit in the mass numbers, taking up unskilled but secure industrial jobs. The Great Migration commenced the beginning of mass racial conflict previously unique to the South, the same many Black families were hoping to escape in their migration. Strategies to perpetuate oppressions of the South were continued by White Detroiters through tactics, such as redlining, and ultimately concentrated new residents into “Black Belts” similar to those forming in sister cities of Chicago, Cleveland, and others.⁴⁵ But amongst such violence and segregation, the American Dream to a certain extent came true for many Black Detroiters. Job security presented Black families with the opportunity to buy houses.

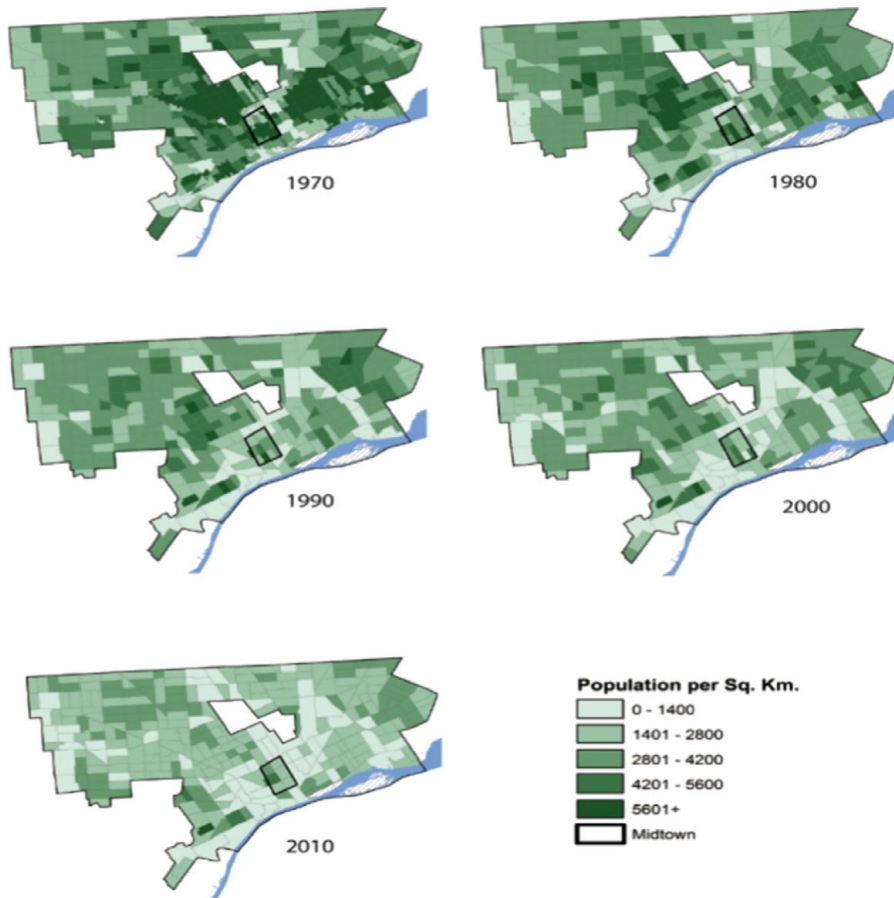
Although these neighborhoods were not designed or designated by their own residents, they often grew into rich culminations of solely Black culture mixed with the successes and independences sought after by every American citizen. In many forms, the hurdles confronting all Black residents necessitated tightly threaded support networks, and therein strong, self-sufficient communities. But this was not the purpose of this new industrial system, but only a byproduct sprouting out of a capitalist shift in national economic gain, the truly violent segregation of Black residents into homogenous groups, and to some extent a rare socialist streak on the federal level marked by the New Deal. We must not forget these neighborhoods were overpopulated, undermaintained, and heavily policed. These conditions were far from ideal and entirely absent of any large-scale Black agency, yet even so Black residents fostered communities, maintained cultural identity, and survived unapologetically.

⁴⁵ See Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 181-208.



Left: The steady rise of concentrated poverty within Detroit. By 1980, a massive White exodus had already been well underway. Notice how in 2010 Midtown was still experiencing the same economic decline as the rest of the city, while Downtown as seen a steady rise since the 1990s. Laura Reese et al. "It's safe to come, we've got lattes': Development disparities in Detroit," Cities (2016).

Since the Great Migration, the height of Detroit's industrial prosperity (and, based on the city's chosen dependence entirely on its mono-industrial strength, its prosperity period) quickly rose and then fell over several decades beginning in the late 1950s with the establishment of the city's profound and impending highway grid. Nowhere is the destructive nature of the urban highway more apparent than in Detroit, where a criss cross of major roads either elevated, sunken, or flat decidedly divide the city into incoherent pieces. The downtown is made an isolated island, while entire neighborhoods are replaced by clovers. The city is massive, and in perhaps an intention of facilitating car traffic through the widely dispersed landscape, planning decisions come coupled with bias, and as in any city plan such harsh decisions favor some over others. In this case, the built environment is cut, the power of the auto industry is carved into concrete, and walkability is effectively abandoned.

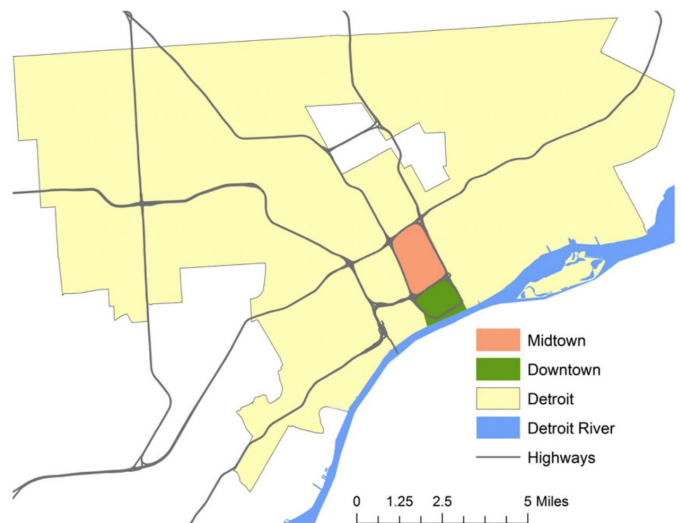
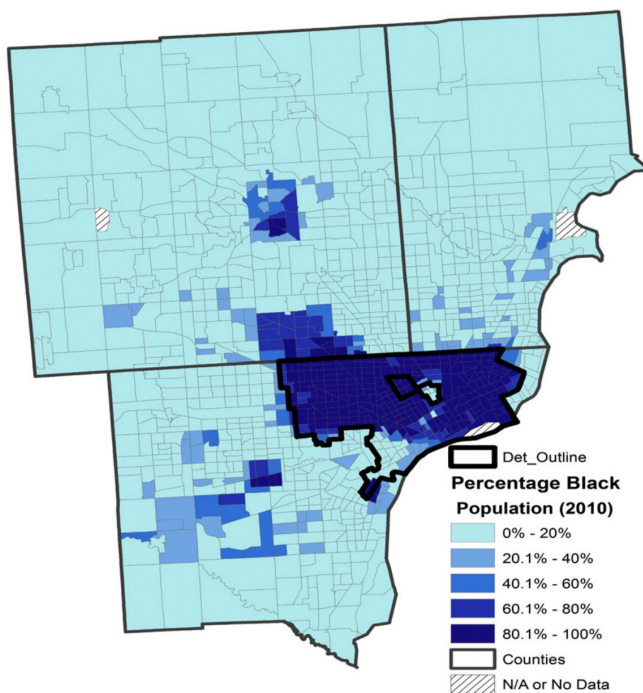


Left: Documenting the depopulation of Detroit. The White exodus affected every corner of the city, leaving only a handful of zip codes with more than 4000 residents per square kilometer. Laura Reese et al. (2016).

When the automobile industry left, the once admired job stock of the city crumbled, and the Black population it kept afloat, fell alongside. White Flight allowed the White residents of the city who fought for their homogenous urban neighborhoods to now continue the tradition in a suburban setting.⁴⁶ Suburbia was the way out, and a beautiful, all-American one at that; the saturation of American homeownership ideology erased any memory of urban collapse. The separation striven for in the city could now be realized tenfold in entirely isolated societies, while the dominantly Black inner city now was crushed under the weight of a failed and abandoned

⁴⁶ According to the US Census Bureau, in 2016 the Michigan median household income was \$59,000. Wayne County, in which Detroit is located, had a median income of \$42,000, while in the city it was \$26,000. The bordering Oakland County, where most Detroit suburbs are situated, had a median income of \$69,000.

capitalist system. Such geographically distinct inequality can be best illustrated by the Grosse Pointes. Since the 1850s, Grosse Pointe has served as an elite haven for Detroit’s richest to escape the city. Starting in 1960, Grosse Pointe used a “point system” that ranked prospective home buyers by race, nationality, occupation, and ‘degree of swarthinness,’”⁴⁷ which fully excluded Black and Asian applicants. The Grosse Pointes (today expanded to include Grosse Pointe Park, Farms, Shores, and Woods) remain as a symbol of concentrated exclusionary wealth just on the border with some of Detroit’s poorest neighborhoods, testament to the impact and legacy of such strict racial segregation.



Above: Location of Midtown and Downtown in relation to the rest of the city of Detroit.
 Left: Black population percentage across Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb Counties.
 Laura Reese et al. (2016).

⁴⁷ Thomas Sugrue, 193.



Above: The closed Packard automobile plant, located just east of Poletown along I-94.

Today, the city consists primarily of single-family free standing houses. Whether or not a house is occupied by a single family is increasingly unsure, but importantly the design is for the most part intended for the perceived comfort and need of a single nuclear family. Unlike most other major US cities, only the downtown neighborhood of Detroit is consistently “built,” combining residential and commercial structures taller than three stories and connected to one another. Midtown, anchored by Wayne State University, resembles downtown but has a much more recent history of development. The rest of the city is made up of residential neighborhoods. Those which have been historically inhabited by a majority Black population are not immediately differentiable from others through the built environment, but more or less share the visual successes of an American ideal neighborhood, blended between the urban and

suburban. Such a consistent housing stock is what gives Detroit its size and its particular relationship to homeownership.

The Black home lives in Detroit. The Black lawn and picket fence live in Detroit; this is more or less the closest thing to beautiful suburbia available to Black Americans under our housing system.



Above: Inside Detroit's Renaissance Center, looking across the Detroit River to Windsor, Canada. (2016).

THE CRASH

The 2008 housing market crash shaped the housing landscape in cities like Detroit in unimaginable ways, solidifying a state of crisis culminating for decades. As a predominantly Black city, and one despite its decline found pride in its history of Black homeownership, the

city was particularly targeted by the crash, bursting a swell of mortgage loans too good to be true.

Across the nation, as the housing market collapsed under an undetected foundation of subprime loans, it was uncovered that these loans were disproportionately targeted toward Communities of Color, regardless of economic status. In fact, “the disparities were especially pronounced for borrowers with higher credit scores.”⁴⁸ Black and Latinx borrowers with good credit scores (above 660) were the victims of high interest rate loans more than three times as often as their White counterparts.⁴⁹ Lending divisions distinguished with managing solely predatory lending practices would overtly target majority Black or Latinx neighborhoods with subprime loan offers, with officers receiving cash bonuses on each subprime loan given to someone who qualified for a prime loan.⁵⁰ Soon, the entire housing market rested on a base of millions of subprime loans packaged in bulk to mask such insidious high risk unheard of in a sector as consistently stable as the US housing market. The results of the crash are known, but it is important to recognize how People of Color in cities like Detroit were directly targeted by predatory lending and thus felt the repercussions in an evaporation of what capital they thought they had left.

From 2000 to 2010, Detroit was hit with a foreclosure crisis in which, “tainted with racism, banks forced—and continued to force—hundreds of thousand of people out of Detroit.”⁵¹ In turn, over the same period, the city of Detroit lost \$200 million in property taxes and up to \$2

⁴⁸ Laura Gottesdiener, *A Dream Foreclosed: Black America and the Fight for a Place to Call Home* (New York City: Zuccotti Park Publishers, 2013), 61.

⁴⁹ Gottesdiener, 61.

⁵⁰ Gottesdiener, 61.

⁵¹ Gottesdiener, 67.

billion in government-absorbed foreclosure costs.⁵² While the city had seen a decades-long steep depopulation in the wake of deindustrialization and suburbanization, the 2008 housing crash and the 21st century foreclosure crisis have violently transformed the city. Today, houses are being sold at the same rates of some monthly mortgage costs.⁵³ The East Side contains whole square miles of complete vacancy, rural landscapes in the the heart of the city. In 2013, Detroit was put under emergency management, giving a single appointed manager sole power over the city, and literally stripping any traces of democracy from the city, remorselessly removing any agency left in Detroit.

A MODERN TERRA NOVA

Detroit has always served as a symbol of America, a frontier of early western expansion and an emblem of independence as a key location in the American Revolution. Since the establishment of the nation, it has remained a border of trade with Canada, and the industrial frontier of the twentieth century, symbolizing the country's ever-expanding border of modernity. Since its fall from the industrial pedestal, Detroit has slowly regained its imagery as a frontier, for decades as one of racial tensions, urban collapse, and the unforgiving nature of capitalism. Yet in the 21st century the narrative has taken a turn, perhaps due to the passage of time, a shift in generational culture, or some other drivers, into a burgeoning frontier of American idealism once more.

⁵² Gottesdiener, 68.

⁵³ Gottesdiener, 68.

The old Detroit took form “via narratives of devastation wrought by deindustrialization, the departure of productive White business and people, and government corruption and incompetence.”⁵⁴ But the new Detroit has established itself in a new class of desire, one not centered on capitalist excellency but “marked by the racially coded signification of the return of White people and the seeming disappearance of Black people in the 2010s narrative of Detroit’s comeback.”⁵⁵ This comeback, described with a sense of inevitability, is driven by a certain blank slate narrative that attracts through potential.

A cornerstone of this “empty” narrative is its disappearance of the remaining Black population of Detroit, unable to move to the suburbs and stuck in a trial of political abandonment and social demonization. In comparing two front covers of *Time*, one in 1990 and the other in 2009, Kinney points out the underlying messages of the two in juxtaposition. The former presents a faceless Black boy facing the destruction of his city, while the other looks to abandoned industrial landscapes as places of potential reinvestment, void of any remaining population. Both containing the title “The Tragedy of Detroit” “reveal a shifting narrative of the destruction of the city as a result of individual action in 1990 in contrast to global processes of labor and manufacturing in 2009.”⁵⁶ The first cover sulks in the pessimistic view of Detroit as a failed city of chaos sustained by an antagonized Black population, while the second now sees, after the fires have gone out and a post-apocalyptic sight as set in, a new emptiness harking on the untouched beauty of Detroit’s colonialist past.

⁵⁴ Rebecca Kinney, *Beautiful Wasteland: The Rise of Detroit as America’s Postindustrial Frontier* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), xi.

⁵⁵ Kinney, xv.

⁵⁶ Kinney, xv.

Today's obsessions with the remnants of Detroit's industrial past, and the architectural beauty that symbolized it, is best identified through the concept of *ruin porn*⁵⁷, a fetishization of architectural destruction as aesthetically pleasing. Detroit's wasteland narrative has been efficiently popularized through the widespread dissemination and interest in the spate of photographs of Detroit architecture, especially the once-glorious, early and mid-twentieth-century structures now in various states of disrepair."⁵⁸ This art form leans on an interplay of crumbling human construction and the natural growth overtaking the now post-apocalyptic landscape. While this may seem to counter popular narratives of capital success, Detroit ruin porn is well integrated into a story of Black failure, the inevitable result of widespread Black ownership, creating apocalyptic, even barbarian frameworks of a city still inhabited by hundreds of thousands of people.

Both narratives are marked by the built structure, whether it be the Black home burning the riots of the 1960s and 70s or the secret grandiosity of a hollow factory or office building. After White families leave, the Black home burns in its own impossibility. But once enough time has passed, the country can begin fetishizing Detroit's broken empty landscape, "dependent on the settlement of contemporary Detroit by primarily White outsiders. It is through this narrative shift that the idea of Detroit not as a postindustrial wasteland but as a postindustrial frontier emerges."⁵⁹ Mainstream excitement around Detroit's emptiness and the potential it holds is ultimately rooted in the same sentiments driving its first White settlement, now seeing

⁵⁷ See Richard Lloyd, *Neo-Bohemia: Art and Commerce in the Postindustrial City*, (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006).

⁵⁸ Kinney, xvi.

⁵⁹ Kinney, xvi.

Black Detroiters as a part of the land, like the Huron, Odawa, Potawatomi, and Iroquois peoples were over 300 years ago.

WHAT GENTRIFICATION LOOKS LIKE

Detroit has seen decades of exodus, in line with a national trend of depopulation of Rust Belt cities across the Northeast and Midwest. Now, through Terra Nova rhetoric and a generation shift back into the city from an outdated suburban lifestyle, Detroit is back on the mainstream radar, particularly within young, White, college-educated circles. Looking through the perspective of a White college educated youth, which I am, it is not hard to understand why gentrification has swept Detroit. Cost of living is wildly low compared to other popular destinations of displacement such as Brooklyn or Berkeley, a solid bohemian scene has already been established, and the postindustrial aesthetic arguably sits comfortably at number one. Previously discussed attractions of ruin porn played a significant part in the *rediscovery* of Detroit as a potentially livable setting for a new White class, lacking the same Black urban fear of the previous generation, to effectively settle the land as theirs to take.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the cultural and physical displacement happening in Detroit is through example. Included are a philanthropy project titled Hantz Farms, a business called Shinola, and a few coffee shops to add a lighter tone of predictable erasure conducted by the stereotypical yuppie. These are all instances of *commercial gentrification*, in which companies buy land and reappropriate it to appeal to a desired population rather than the city's current resident. Much of the wave of displacement in Detroit has happened through initial

corporate investment attracting waves of residential upheaval, and thus looking closely at a few of these institutions, however small, can reveal social transitions on a macro scale.

THE FARM

I first encountered Hantz Farms on my initial Detroit visit, with my college class. As a part of our itinerary, we met with the president of the project at the time, Mike Score, who toured us around the land, boasting wholeheartedly his own pride in helping his hometown. Hantz Farms is essentially a philanthropic branch of Hantz Group, a Michigan-based, “family owned” financial conglomerate. The project’s goal is to beautify areas of Detroit through vacant land acquisition, block clearing and cleaning, and planting hundreds of trees in perfect rows. “Picture oaks, maples, and other high value trees planted in straight, evenly spaced rows,” transforming now undesirable Northeast Detroit as potentially “a breathtaking place of beauty.”⁶⁰ “We can build a new, green economy in Detroit, and lead the world by example. Join us.” This language, as vague as it is inspiring, intentionally avoided any concrete initiatives or even breaking down what exactly constitutes this green economy. When asked what they plan to do with the property once the trees grow, Score had little to say. He mentioned perhaps selling the lumber (since these were not even fruit-bearing trees), or maybe selling the land to future buyers, but nothing specific. This type of land use is symbolic of much of the conversation around *saving Detroit*. These investments, while not traditional in form, follow a basic capitalist structure of land speculation, planning to boost property prices high enough to sell for a fortune to whoever is willing to buy. Most importantly, Hantz Farms entirely disregards the voices or concerns of the

⁶⁰ See <http://www.hantzfarmsdetroit.com>.

remaining local residents, providing only a few jobs brought in from outside Detroit, some volunteer opportunities, and the blessing of subjective beautification.

In 2008, Detroit sold 180 acres of land for \$520,000, or \$275 per parcel, to John Hantz for his Hantz Woodlands proposal. From the very beginning, local residents protested this deal, seen as “a neo-colonial land grab by a White businessman in a Black city,” signaling the “racial antagonisms that animate struggles over a territorial reordering underway in Detroit.”⁶¹ This deal fell into a trend of cheap privatizations of massive swaths of land to corporations as the city was desperate for tax revenue, without any funds to address entire neighborhoods themselves. This also came in tandem with a formalized strategy report drawn up by Detroit Future City, a contested think tank we will discuss later, which would aim to “fix the so-called spatial mismatch between surplus land and reduced population—by introducing landscape features we often associate with the countryside, like wilderness, farms, ponds, and forests into the Motor City’s most vacant neighborhoods.”⁶² The problem here is not in innovative and green solutions to mass land vacancy; people protested the ways in which both narratives and actions ignored and effectively erased the agency of the hundreds of thousands of people living in and around these acquired acres. Unrecognized by the city, Detroit residents have been repurposing vacant lots for years, “from invoking historical loss and racial injustice to establishing gardens and community centers, mowing fields, and squatting in houses.”⁶³ These residents are finding innovative and sustainable land uses that decenter profit incentive and promote greater sense of belonging and vitality, but the city has its own agenda.

⁶¹ Sara Safransky, “Rethinking Land Struggle in the Postindustrial City,” *Antipode* 49, no. 4 (2017): 1080.

⁶² Safransky, 1080.

⁶³ Safransky, 1080.

What Hantz Farms does not recognize is that empty lots are being primarily repurposed into community gardens not for the purpose of beautification, but to provide basic nutritional sustenance to communities miles from the nearest grocery store. Detroit actually has the potential to become food secure through local agricultural practice, but “concerns among smallholders over the precariousness of land tenure have become more pronounced as the city’s agricultural potential attracts both young (mostly White) idealistic farmers from outside the city interested in farming a few lots and entrepreneur-investors with visions for large-scale projects like Hantz Woodlands.”⁶⁴ As the narrative surrounding Detroit’s vacant land shifts to a culturally positive, potentially lucrative opportunity, groups like Hantz Farms quickly seize the land residents have been informally using while trying to legally purchase it from the city. Until the city can learn to invest in its *people*, even green urbanism will continue to decenter vulnerable communities until they are priced out and literally forced off of their land.

The Hantz project is emblematic of a much larger trend of agricultural gentrification, importantly “a rapid proliferation of large-scale land acquisitions by corporate and state entities for agricultural production.”⁶⁵ In places like Detroit, where urban farming has served as a means of reclaiming agency and agricultural independence for many Black communities, “green grabs” like Hantz Farms directly counter such progress, seizing land to be recycled into the same capitalist system of production that caused such inequality and such vacancy in the first place. The dynamics at play here contain both symbolisms of colonial land seizure and capitalization, as well as real, threatening ramifications for residents today, who remain in the so-called calm before the storm, when Hantz decides to sell properties for redevelopment.

⁶⁴ Safransky, 1084.

⁶⁵ Safransky, 1085.

THE BRAND

SHINOLA is a luxury brand that sells watches, bicycles, leather goods, and journals.

The brand's headquarters and factory occupy 30,000 square feet in the old Argonaut Building, a building built to house General Motors' research lab, in the New District of the city.⁶⁶ Their products are not cheap, but the company follows the idea that "American manufacturing costs more. Quality materials cost more. American products are inherently *worth more*."⁶⁷ That nostalgic Americana design is the brand's defining characteristic, found explicitly in all Shinola products.

The argument that American products are inherently worth more is one that Shinola has perfectly embodied. Detroit is the embodiment of American manufacturing, and since the auto industry left, the city has sought a way to rebrand itself. Shinola, whose name is taken from the 20th century shoe polish company, echoes that romanticized American story so fetishized by consumers. The design of Shinola products mimic well Detroit's history and culture, as "nods to Detroit's architectural heritage are deeply ingrained in Shinola's watches, from the Art Deco numerals that appear on each watch's face to the curved ribs of the brand's signature steel crowns,"⁶⁸ and "styles such as the unwaveringly masculine Runwell and Brakeman exude a certain industrial strength, powered by the Swiss-made but Detroit-built Argonite movement beneath."⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Jon Moy, "On Shinola, Detroit's Misguided White Knight," Complex (March 26, 2014), <http://www.complex.com/style/shinola-detroits-misguided-white-knight>.

⁶⁷ Jon Moy.

⁶⁸ Ryan Thompson, "How Detroit Got Its Cool Back," Mr Porter, <http://www.mrporter.com/journal/in-partnership-with-shinola/how-detroit-got-its-cool-back/501>.

⁶⁹ Ryan Thompson.

On the Shinola website, the companies asks itself, “Why not accept that manufacturing is gone from America? Why not let the rust and weeds finish what they started? Why not just embrace the era of disposability?”⁷⁰ The brand seems to be fully aware of the stigmatization of Detroit, but quickly attempts to flip any previous conceptions in a few sentences:

We don’t think American manufacturing ever failed for being too good. Our worst didn’t come when we were at our best. It happened when we thought good was good enough. It’s a tall order to return to form, but we’re up for it. We’re starting with the reinvigoration of a storied American brand, and a storied American city. Because we believe in the beauty of industry. The glory of manufacturing.⁷¹

Shinola has commodified that beloved pre-automatization, working class craftsmanship aesthetic, claiming “connection with rural or urban traditions of manual labor work, evoking the image of the artisan in his studio, the farmer hard at work, the pioneer tending his wilderness campfire or the grittiness of life in Detroit.”⁷² These images not only excuse the high prices, but tie in fabrics of American colonial ideology venturing far past the implications of a watch.

The brand has a series of 15 second videos of employees talking about cooking with their mom, finding their son’s diary, and buying their own home. Here they attempt to sway the viewer with personal, relatable anecdotes of family, ownership, and the working class breadwinner⁷³ tapping into the same pseudo-nostalgic sentiments evoked through

⁷⁰ www.shinola.com.

⁷¹ www.shinola.com.

⁷² Rebekah Modrak, “Bougie Crap: Art, Design and Gentrification,” Infinite Mile Detroit (February 2015), http://infinitemiledetroit.com/Bougie_Crap_Art,_Design_and_Gentrification.html.

⁷³ The working class breadwinner is an ideological icon best summarized in “bringing home the bacon.” The position of financial supporter for one’s family is very much a masculinized, White role that has played a part in the historical employment barriers to those who do not fit that mold (anyone who is not White or a man). See Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York City: The New Press, 2012).

homeownership ideology. Shinola effectively instills these ideals through branding strategies, but more importantly through a physical occupation of space in their stores and factories.

Like Hantz Farms, Shinola quickly opted into a deal with the city to buy the property they own now for next to nothing. However, this property can be seen as far more desirable than acres of empty land; it is positioned a refurbished factory building in Mid Town, which has been the main region of gentrification in recent years. Their flagship store, in the same neighborhood, sits adjacent to a pricy burger place in a built design mimicking today's infamously redeveloped Meatpacking District in New York.

Many Detroiters have expressed more frustration than excitement, arguing that ““moving in does not make you historical. You don't get the identity just by inhabiting a place.””⁷⁴ Shinola is exactly the type of brand that attracts an insidious class of privileged, White youth, whose literal presence pushes property value up and the Communities of Color who have managed to survive Detroit's decline, out of the city.

Shinola found Detroit in a state of emergency, and saw the opportunity to transform the rich past and American nationalism of Detroit into an incredibly lucrative product. The Shinola model is one that Detroit desperately craves, the kind of flashy, Americana brand that attracts a younger population and at first glance recreates the manufacturing excellence Detroit was known for. It is nauseating to see how little the Detroit community is heard and effectively served. The success story of Shinola demonstrates the inequalities that are inherent in a capitalist framework, how a city as groundbreaking as Detroit would rather capitalize on the fetishization of

⁷⁴ Karen Heller, “The Luxury-Goods Company Shinola is Capitalizing on Detroit,” Washington Post (November 17, 2014), https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-luxury-goods-company-shinola-is-capitalizing-on-detroit/2014/11/17/638f88a4-6a8f-11e4-b053-65cea7903f2e_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.3c674264d15e.

industrial-era American innovation than exercise real, contemporary innovation that could maybe benefit its own citizens.

‘COFFEE AND _____’ is a coffee shop on East Jefferson Avenue in the Jefferson-Chalmers neighborhood. The coffee shop is symbolic of a lot of things, and can only be truly evaluated once you step inside. This place is inarguably part of the problem, almost as a hyperconscious self-critique, something I would sarcastically hypothesize before finding it. The eccentricity is palpable. The emphasis is on harking back to a hippy mindset without the activist roots or anti-war, anti-capitalist agenda. In between expressions of anger at the city for not allowing an acquisition of five empty lots across the street, or when a Central American Airbnb gets booked right before you apply, I hear exclamations like “I can’t believe everyone is so concerned with work!” followed by a “for realsies!” to drive home the passion over the art of life and travel. Before discussing the “educated, beautiful, and happy” artistry of Call Me By Your Name, a groundbreaking work over the love story of two young, White, wealthy gay cis men, they passionately debase Cancun as a place of dirt and danger, with a rather unremarkable Airbnb selection. Back to the disgust over people’s labor obsession, this was in response to a man, her friend, and his work ethic concerning his future publication, a cookbook entitled “Spiritual Veganism,” sparking the Airbnb conversation with the undying conflict we all face, how difficult it is to find a “Vegan Airbnb.” Angela Foster, who owns the shop, once said:

So many people walk in and say, ‘Oh, I guess they couldn’t find a Black entrepreneur... It’s not a Black and White thing. It’s whatever neighborhood people want to do something in. That’s it. That’s absolutely it.... I don’t see how a city this big with so much property and so much opportunity, I don’t see how anyone could be left out.... I guess I’m not buying into this conspiracy

theory. You have to know where to look. Some people aren't social creatures. So maybe those are the people being left out.⁷⁵

Maybe, Angela.

'TRINOSOPHES'—I didn't think it could get any worse, but this place is what the previous might strive to be. Between an independent record store and a sparsely curated gallery, both perhaps affiliated, this coffee shop, with an accompaniment of vegan or gluten free food options. The space itself is massive, a clear storefront with offshoots bleeding into other parcels toward the back. One extremity holds a performance space, complete with a stage, full drum and amp set, and plenty of empty standing space. The other holds what I believe to be the kitchen, masked behind a thick curtain. The minimalist design holds a few long tables and designer chairs, with maybe two electrical outlets to share. Everyone has a macbook open, either hanging on their gmail while they gossip with a friend, scrolling through a facebook news feed, or maybe actually engaged in an art or writing project. Somehow everyone already here seems to know each other. Maybe because they all share the same age, haircut, wardrobe, and mannerisms, they find solace in one other after venturing out to such daunting and dangerous town driven by whichever art scene, low rent, or guarantee of independence they found too enticing.

This is not to say that a locally owned coffee shop is inherently detrimental to a community at risk of gentrification. It is to say that such an establishment has more broadly aligned itself into a gentrifier culture that intentionally or unintentionally gears toward the

⁷⁵ Peter Moskowitz, *How to Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequality, and the Fight for the City* (New York City: Nation Books, 2017), 85.

demand of a certain customer.⁷⁶ Coffee is a very common drink, but when an aesthetic is implemented to attract young White college-educated folks into the neighborhood, and more or less provides nothing but one or two jobs for local residents, then the shop can be considered harmful. Plus its usually unaffordable.

Conversely, *Avalon Breads*, another bakery and coffee shop, attempts explicitly to center itself around community contributions and work that goes deeper than a “communal table.”⁷⁷ They ground their work in mantra of “Earth, Community, and Employees.” Their baking is local, organic, and environmentally conscious; they aspire for compassion and healing through the support of local organizations; and they promise a healthy, generous work environment for their employees, most of whom are actually from Detroit.⁷⁸ Their work is tangible and consistent, and that is respectable for a bakery.

SPECULATIVE DETROIT

Today, Detroit can be broken into two polarized worlds, the Midtown-Downtown, and everything else. While the outer neighborhoods have been left to wither, a few have put massive financial investments into the Downtown and Midtown areas in an attempt to revitalize the city as they see fit. Most notably, Dan Gilbert, the CEO of Quicken Loans, has taken a particular interest in centering Detroit as a 21st century hub of culture and technology. He has come to own far more than Quicken Loans, one of the largest mortgage companies in the country (ironically). Among others is Bedrock, the largest development company in Detroit and

⁷⁶ See Terry Clark, *The City as an Entertainment Machine* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 275-290.

⁷⁷ See <http://www.lepainquotidien.com>.

⁷⁸ See <http://www.avalonbreads.net/welcome>.

Gilbert's sizeable foot in the planning of the city. Over the last few years he has accumulated over 80 buildings in downtown, and is known for "curating the feeling of the streets here, recommending park designs to the city, throwing events to draw in tourists, and picking shops that fit in with his high-end yet independent aesthetic."⁷⁹ His region of investment, Midtown and Downtown, occupy a mere 7.2 square miles (or about three percent) of the city, now infamously known to attract any and all economic opportunity for the city. In the 7.2, 90 percent of the homes are occupied, while dozens of new buildings go up every year.⁸⁰ Alone, the 7.2 stands as a successful venture, but this is only an illusion. The rebirth of Detroit "can exist only as a heavily subsidized state, perpetuating the historical constriction of subsidy and wealth to the rest of Detroit."⁸¹ The 7.2 can only survive with a much larger tax base, draining money from the rest of the city to be concentrated in where it theoretically "matters."



Left: Construction of the Detroit "People Mover" along Woodward Avenue, funded by Dan Gilbert. The monorail connects Midtown and Downtown along the city's central corridor. (2016)

In 2005, 68 percent of mortgages in Detroit were subprime, compared to the national rate of 24 percent.⁸² As property values dropped, those who still lived in the city fled if they could, only traversing the city border to find suburbs with higher quality of life at a lower price. From 2000 to 2010, the city saw another mass exodus, but this time it was majority Black, since there were not many White people to leave in the first place. But this time it was not a choice; while White folks left in fear of their Black neighbors, Black folks left to survive, to escape monthly mortgage rates costing half the price of the property itself. Now, those who cannot afford to leave must face the cyclical nature of predatory eviction and foreclosure. Back taxes in the city rose and rose, until in 2015 when “the county began cracking down, when many families’ tax bills had reached more than \$10,000. The county seized and sold 30,000 homes at auction that year. At least 10,000 of the homes were occupied.”⁸³

The newfound attraction to Detroit can be largely attributed to a concept coined by Richard Florida, who in 2008 stated his hopeful attitude toward Detroit, pointing out that “already you can see the renewal, revitalization, not from the government, but from the bootstraps, from creative people... Every single person is creative and what’s key to rebuilding Detroit is harnessing the creativity of everyone.”⁸⁴ Florida’s definition of the “creative class,” professionals within industries he deems “creative,” is essentially a whitewashed term for the gentrifying class.⁸⁵ Note his intentional dismissal of government involvement, and literally saying bootstraps. His talk in 2015 was sponsored by Quicken Loans and Shinola.⁸⁶ Florida has brought gentrification into the academic realm, no longer an unintentional result of shifts in

⁸² Moskowitz, 99.

⁸³ Moskowitz, 100.

⁸⁴ Moskowitz, 78.

⁸⁵ See Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York City: Basic Books, 2003).

⁸⁶ Moskowitz, 78.

speculation and socioeconomic geography, but a tool for cities to save themselves. It's not an accident, it's a theory put into practice. Florida defines a youth class working in "creative sectors," meaning essentially anything but mass manufacturing. And in Detroit, a city literally built on industrial manufacturing, it's working. The fact that Quicken Loans, a mortgage company tangibly producing little more than loan forms, has become the new Ford, is testament to this transition. But such a dramatic shift to the creative does not come without bias. These jobs, including lawyers, doctors, and professional artists, are for the most part highly-skilled, college educated positions that by definition ignore the trades most familiar to Detroit's existing population.

This prompts the questions Moskowitz asks in *How to Kill a City*: "How does the Starbucks barista serving the creative-class lawyer become a creative barista? How do you turn an entire economy that's built on low-wage labor into a creative economy? How do you account for the fact that the rise in the creative class seems to be coupled with the decline in the middle class?" The answer is, you don't. The grand schemes of Florida and Gilbert do not account for what is already in Detroit; their intended rise from the ashes implies that all that is left of Detroit is exactly that, ashes. There is no room for these people in the future of Detroit, so the only place they can go is away and out of sight.

However, Dan Gilbert, and the new creative class he employs, thinks otherwise. The narrative circulated through the 7.2 is that, as an employee of Gilbert's, Max Gordon, puts it, "We have to turn everything upside down to turn it right-side up... It's an area that requires a lot of work."⁸⁷ Gordon is able to preserve his honorable saviorist duty while remaining passive in

⁸⁷ Moskowitz, 75.

the inevitability of the process; this is just how it goes, and everyone will be better for it in the end. For Gilbert, Gordon, and people interested in renewing Detroit, “believing that hipsters can reverse the consequences of late-stage capitalism is a more attractive thought... than realizing that many American cities are, for now, screwed thanks to postindustrial decline and growing inequality.”⁸⁸ In this sense they are right; gentrification requires stark inequality. Real solutions would require government intervention which, in our neoliberal context, is next to impossible. Gentrification is the Jim Crow segregation of today, a legal, systemic framework for prioritizing a certain population, a privatized eminent domain on a major scale. This allows the foundational ideology of property ownership and home building established hundreds of years ago. Now an open wilderness, Detroit waits to be settled once again. Quicken Loans, not inherently a “creative” enterprise, has reinvented itself, transforming the downtown into a private space, belonging to only some. Detroit’s land is slowly being concentrated, transitioning from a majority Black, resident-owned landscape to a White resettlement, privatized neighborhoods at a time. It is a “boot-strapping, millennial-attracting juggernaut,”⁸⁹ reinventing the American Dream in Detroit as now a creative frontier. The Black homes of the collective past have been forgotten, stripped of any resources provided by the city. The return of White population by necessity brings with it the dismantling of what Black agency and ownership had fostered in amidst the trials of the last half century.

While people like Angela Foster (from ‘Coffee and ____’) may believe that gentrification cannot occur with so much vacant space, Detroit’s gentrification is not like dense cities like San Francisco and New York, where the only available space is where someone had just been priced

⁸⁸ Moskowitz, 82.

⁸⁹ Moskowitz, 83.

out of. “The rich, mostly White newcomers to the city and their allies in business get accolades from the press, the government’s attention, and the financial backing of Detroit’s nonprofit sector, while the rest of the city—the remaining 134.8 square miles outside the 7.2—slowly falls off the map, bled out by foreclosures, blight, and a lack of city services.”⁹⁰ Homes where people are being evicted are for the most part left abandoned by their new owners, bought by the dozen in speculation. The outer neighborhoods are not yet ready for the creative class to move in en masse, but what is important, the first step in the process, is the removal of what remains. Just like the beautification preached by Hantz Farms, speculative properties are best left empty and “clean.” Outer neighborhoods might not be gentrified for years, but there is nothing stopping banks and property owners from kicking Black families out as soon as they can.

I FOUND MY OLD HOUSE IN DETROIT TODAY

Something that makes Detroit so unique is its history, rich and long, and a pivotal part of much of the United States’ climb to empire. The city has in many ways acted as a frontier, geographically in the process of Western Expansion, politically as a crucial border point, and culturally as a champion of the industrialization that launched the country into modernity. Because of all of this, much of Detroit’s ideological power comes from nostalgia, the city’s ability to whimsically recall memory of a glorious past and the emotions it evokes. However, the branded nostalgia of Detroit is not a full story.

Let us remember all we have discussed regarding Detroit’s history, and all we have discussed of this country’s history. The settler colonialism, spatial manifestations of slavery,

⁹⁰ Moskowitz, 91.

racial segregation and White Flight, the current era of eviction and disenfranchisement with a daunting future of even further displacement, these are all keystones of Detroit's and the United States' foundation. But how often are these histories included in narratives of not only national pride, but a yearning for the older times, perhaps when American was Great? This is an example of what cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo defines as "imperialist nostalgia." This is a collective memory that "deliberately alters a form of life, and then regrets that things have not remained as they were prior" to the current era and its host of problems.⁹¹ The harmless and relatable nature of nostalgia allows for the transformation of the "colonial agent into an innocent bystander,"⁹² essentially removing the blame of the perpetrator and invalidating the harm perpetuated today toward poor Black residents of Detroit.



Detroit.
(2017).

⁹¹ Kinney, 7.

⁹² Kinney, 7.

We can see such intentionally selective memory explicitly across every century of this country's existence, but in Detroit it is at its most potent. The peak of Detroit is hard to locate, but there are certainly Detroiters around today who remember a brighter time. The nostalgia surrounding Detroit's past is what drives the content of "I found my old house in Detroit today," and online blog apart of city-data.com. In *Beautiful Wasteland*, Rebecca J. Kinney follows this blog as it reveals a commonly held sentiment regarding the past and present of Detroit. While the entire existence of the blog is testament to the presence of imperialist nostalgia, one user in particular, MaryleeII, exemplified how the way we choose to remember the past can truly warp our perceptions of today's reality. It seems best to let MaryleeII explain for herself:

My parents and grandparents actually paid for their homes. No government program, no special let's settle the score deals, just cash. They paid on their homes for 20 years. That meant paying every month, or you were evicted. No one cared about your sob story, pay or get out.... Meanwhile, other 'oppressed minorities' were literally given the homes we'd broken our backs to build and maintain. All sorts of HUD programs to shoehorn in the oppressed. Once they got there, if they got behind on their payments, no problem, just grant extensions.⁹³

As one can imagine, the blog is centered around rediscovering your old Detroit house as it is today. It seems that the majority of contributors are White, middle-aged, and left Detroit at some point during the second half of the 20th century along with most of the city's White population. The narrative here remains unchanged from the narrative then, that with the growing Black population and the racial frictions that came along, Detroit lost its American integrity to a dangerous community hoisted by welfare alone. The frustration MaryleeII is common, targeting beneficiaries of subsidized housing and other welfare programs.

⁹³ Kinney, 14.

The successes of Detroit's mid-century White working class, and the failure of today's Black working class are the only real factors at play here, in an environment where context or evidence are unneeded. The language of MaryleeII and other users "fits within an archetypal trope of universal citizenship, in which hard work and service to one's country makes possible the American Dream."⁹⁴ Social issues are automatically linked to current residents, who now become objectively non-citizens. The absence of acknowledgement of how White prosperity in old Detroit was built on Black oppression, or how that oppression preserves itself in Detroit today, or how the viability of homeownership sits on the ability to accumulate wealth over generations, leaves a clear antagonism impossible to refute.

Ironically, in the case of MaryleeII, her childhood home was in fact publicly subsidized through the VA mortgage program. In contradiction with the common belief of universal access to homeownership, "there is a tenor of vitriol about the support of government-backed mortgages to enable non White people to purchase homes."⁹⁵ Throughout the blog, the use of 'welfare queen' rhetoric perpetuates the constructed conflation between low-income Black communities, welfare, and the type of passive and abusive behavior that can nullify one's cultural citizenship. Yet as government support is dissociated from White communities, housing subsidies granted to MaryleeII and millions of other White Americans are forcibly forgotten or perhaps never recognized at all.

For MaryleeII and many others, the decline of Detroit and the dilapidation and neglect of their childhood homes is an emotional experience. No one wants to lose a space holding such important memory, but where the mind goes next reflects an internalization of imperialist

⁹⁴ Kinney, 12.

⁹⁵ Kinney, 14.

domination capable of constructing entirely fabricated realities in order to preserve its own credibility. “We still feel the loss, knowing we can never go back home,”⁹⁶ writes MaryleeII, a self-described ‘refugee.’ They were “forced” to leave, and now “there isn’t anything left to go back to!”⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Kinney, 20.

⁹⁷ Kinney, 21.

4. CRITIQUE

CREATING A CITIZENRY

The turn of the century was marked by strong resurgence of homeownership support backed by a consistently fruitful housing market. Both Clinton and Bush Jr advocated strongly for homeownership and its inherently American values, stating that “where homeownership flourishes, neighborhoods are more stable, residents are more civic-minded schools are better and crime rates decline.”⁹⁸ Among the repopularization of urban living and an increasingly rental-based market, the ideological “pipeline” linking homeownership with a generally better society had been successfully formed in the modern era. By 2006, almost 70 percent of Americans owned their homes, the largest percentage in American history.⁹⁹ Before the housing market crashed, as reflected on in the *New Yorker*, literally all walks of life could perhaps agree on nothing but the good found in owning your home, and for good reason.¹⁰⁰

Homeownership, from its birth to the modern era, as proven to be an unparalleled tool in social mobility, ensuring a secure retirement, raising a family, and generally combatting the overwhelming anxiety of economic insecurity felt particularly in this time. Americans hold more wealth in their homes than anything else, “making housing wealth the centerpiece of economic mobility and financial independence.”¹⁰¹ When discussing the incentives for the average American family to buy a home, steady wealth accumulation trumps all others. The most

⁹⁸ Brian McCabe, *No Place Like Home: Wealth, Community, and the Politics of Homeownership* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 8.

⁹⁹ McCabe, 4.

¹⁰⁰ McCabe, 4.

¹⁰¹ McCabe, 4.

obvious distinction between homeownership and renting is the ability to grow equity in your home; while a rent check essentially disappears every month, mortgage payments go back into your house, growing the amount of equity you own. Since homeownership is established in this country alongside the rental market, the ability to then grow home equity and thus own property is a select privilege by nature. The amenities of homeownership discussed previously, particularly the benefit of social and economic mobility, comes strictly in tandem with the ownership of property. This articulation lends to the grave impactability of homeownership, psychologically and tangibly, as a glorified goal of every American family. As rates of homeownership grew in the early 21st century, the power and ultimately the consequences of the blindly trusted housing market proved beyond comprehension, assumed infallible. That was all proven to be empty from the start as the bubble popped in 2007 and 2008, dismantling the credibility of one of our most precious facets of American identity.

For federal and state governing bodies, incentives for promoting homeownership shift away from individual economic gain and toward a more ideological mindset concerning the cohesion and conformity of the population. As has always been the case, homeownership establishes a literal stake in the land and an investment in society as an active participant. The responsibilities of land ownership involve the duties of the ideal citizen, promoting civic engagement through the personal incentives of one's own home and property value. Since home equity is so crucial in the individual wealth of millions of Americans, ensuring the security of that wealth becomes imperative. Such investment is naturally beneficial to the state, as it creates active citizens caring for their own communities without the help of public resources, as well as a rather patriotic public readily conforming to whatever rhetoric defends *our* land.

The power of homeownership to make or break a citizenry links directly to the original purpose of home building in early European colonization, where the establishment of property ownership was the only thing separating settled land from the wild. Under this thought, “Early American political leaders believed that the ownership of real property forced citizens to take a heightened interest in the affairs of their communities and their country.”¹⁰² Conversely, “Citizens who failed to acquire property lacked an investment in the future of their country and were dismissed as undeserving of the rights and responsibilities of membership in the political community.”¹⁰³ Homeownership, from a federal perspective, has the potential to both reveal who among us share the values of the state, and then allow for a full, albeit forced, conformity by those deemed worthy. In this regard, even those who have been given access to this ownership ideal still lose agency in conforming to the established norm of living. As we can easily see in the traditional suburban structure, one that has historically excluded most anyone but the White middle class, it still becomes difficult to point to any real variety of choice or agency belonging to the homeowner. Even where there is choice, in location, interior design, or the like, options remain through either legal, social, or economic pressure, rather limited, revealing the established ideal to be truly anything but independent.

Thus, we reveal two levels of suppression, the clear and the disguised perhaps. The supposed privileged class, those who participate in our system of homeownership, perpetuate “patterns of segregation and social exclusion in their neighborhoods, raising doubts about the benefits to communities that come from active, engaged citizenship.”¹⁰⁴ Yet in tandem, the citizen role achieved by these homeowners in many respects make it only marginally further than

¹⁰² McCabe, 7.

¹⁰³ McCabe, 8.

¹⁰⁴ McCabe, 5.

those they exclude from their communities. In fact, one can argue, as the White middle class homeowner only invests further into a system that ultimately suppresses everyone, the marginalized and rejected, who in many cases are forced into far more liberating, abolitionist practices of living, are freer than us all. However this is only theoretical, ignoring the very real oppressions that form the realities of our country's most marginalized communities, and only serves to speculate a reconceptualization of our true values and how they are limited.

What is important to remember is that the narrative of the homeowner citizen is a politically constructed one, carried by all points of the political spectrum equally. As Democratic Senator Paul Sarbanes articulated in 2003,

With each homeowner, we create another anchor in a community, another advocate for better schools, safer streets, small business development. Common sense tells us and the evidence actually confirms that homeowners are more engaged citizens and more active in their communities.¹⁰⁵

This statement, that ownership promotes a more invested community member, is not wrong, but Sarbanes' language is loaded nonetheless. Firstly, he intentionally or unconsciously furthers the antagonism of not the rental system and its flaws, but the renters themselves, for creating poor school systems, dangerous public spaces, and local economic depression. Secondly, he perpetuates a single solution rhetoric, that if we want good schools or safe streets, than we need more homeowners; it is that simple, it is *common sense*. Finally, not only does Sarbanes position ownership as the only solution, but entangles it with a broader American idealism that in itself assumes the desire and need for a host of other socially constructed norms. The examples he uses of better schools, safer streets, and small business development are employed as assumed desires of his audience, the American public. The context he gives for his argument is an

¹⁰⁵ McCabe, 8-9.

intentionally normalized one, promoting a certain economic agenda, as well as the incredibly weighted terminology of safe streets and good schools. While this may seem like a perfectly apolitical statement, Sarbanes' carefully thought out wording promotes an entirely constructed lifestyle, dependent not on our intuitive notions of quality of life, but those we, as the "average American," have more or less been taught to believe.

HOMEOWNERSHIP AND THE NATIONAL AGENDA

Clinton and Bush Jr. are far from the only heads of state who have championed homeownership as the pathway to the American Dream. As discussed in Part I, homeownership ideology finds its roots in the very beginning of our nation, a distinctive means of establishing the American empire in this wild part of the world. Popular opinion of homeownership as economically sustainable for the individual is not incorrect, but understanding that these values are employed and in no way inherent, is key to finding true values, and ultimately a humanist, communitarian living system.

Per example, older employments of the American housing ideal illustrated the same paradoxes we find in today's housing environment. Individualism was perhaps best expressed in the Victorian home, an ornamental, non-conformist housing style that by definition rejected any sense of a cookie cutter model. Yet even these homes, built during eras of massive industrialization, "depended on industry for their naturalistic effect and their wide availability."

¹⁰⁶ The aesthetic and reproducibility of these houses only mimicked what they attempted to capture, harking on a conflict most apparent in the suburban landscape. The nuclear family

¹⁰⁶ Wright, 100.

suburban home, Levittown or ranch-style, the whole suburban project was based on an agrarian nostalgia inflamed by the horror of the industrial city, and particularly its contents of newly migrated Black workers. The country took this model with tired and afraid arms wide open, blind to the artificiality of this new vision. The normalization and universal praise of the single family property was not natural; “It was grounded in changing material conditions of housing and social relations of work in industrializing northern cities, and in struggling over meaning, form, and function of the family home.”¹⁰⁷ The United States was lost in conflicting ideas of space and place, the good and the bad of the industrial urban landscape, and what a better future could look like.

It is safe to say that, since World War II, White families have consumed homeownership because of an enticing combination of financial security, nostalgic obsession with the propertied, independent lifestyle of the young United States, and the promise of White neighbors. On a governmental level, a satisfied White population is a very good thing, and the conformity and nationalistic tendencies ensured by widespread homeownership are impossible to ignore. All of these incentives make perfect sense, but the problem is that they are in no way part of a transparent campaign. The inequality created by our housing system must be sold to a citizenry, presented in a way that hides its own flaws, and suppresses the voices of those who do not benefit.

Even in its most positive light, the homeownership narrative illustrated the convoluted and ultimately problematic perspective it holds and disseminates. As President Hoover once stated,

¹⁰⁷ Garb, 1.

Nothing contributes more to social stability and the happiness of our people than the surrounding of their home. It should be possible in our country for anybody of sound character and industrious habits to provide himself with adequate housing and preferably to buy his home¹⁰⁸

Under one light, Hoover presents homeownership as a potential benefit for all, a fundamental symbol of liberty and opportunity. His message is one of social good and national strength, a critical theme at the time of his presidency, when the Great Depression proved to greatly test the people's support of their own state and the values it held. Under another light, his wording carries much more than a positive outlook on housing. He still distinguishes the citizen apt for ownership, creating an 'other' theoretically undeserving and unqualified to own their own home. In his patriotism it carries the message of conformity and a traditional industriousness. He establishes a self-sufficient rhetoric to remove any sense that homeownership can be provided to those who have not earned it. Finally, he reinforces the aspect of purchase, that this is inherently and economic transaction within a capitalist system.

The language used across the centuries has changed little up to the current day. Perhaps the most explicit and comprehensive campaign on the federal level in recent years was President Clinton's National Homeownership Strategy. The campaign more or less sought to raise rates of homeownership across the country by any means. Alongside an array of new home construction, the strategy included "greater access to education and counseling services, enabling would-be homeowners to make sounder financial decisions."¹⁰⁹ Clinton's strategy was unique in scope, but not at all in message, as his

¹⁰⁸ McCabe, 21.

¹⁰⁹ McCabe, 68.

promises harked on those of past presidencies, and often centered around the popular *better citizen* rhetoric. “When we boost the number of homeowners in this country,” Clinton spoke, “We strengthen our economy, create jobs, build up the middle class, and build better citizens.”¹¹⁰ In the process of homeownership, everyone becomes a better citizen—the owners, the builders, and even the spectators. This is not a lauding of ownership, of the home, or individuality; but of the country, a unification under shared valueship, and an instilled desire to by all means physically present our citizenship to the world.

Bluntly put, the evidence surrounding the connection between homeownership and citizenship is little to none, if not wholly biased.¹¹¹ The label of citizen cannot be defined without involving the same ideology that drives our conceptions of homeownership. If the role of the homeowner and the role of the citizen are both social and political constructions, than even direct links between homeowners and engaged democratic citizens would only prove itself. This is where we find ourselves in amidst this discussion, of whether homeownership is good or bad, consequential or unrelated, to the wellbeing of the individual, the family, or the community. Only the country.

THE HOMEOWNERSHIP MODEL

Here I hope to capture the idea of the *homeownership model*, the framework universally employed in the United States. To fit under this model does not require that you own property,

¹¹⁰ McCabe, 69.

¹¹¹ McCabe, 69-70.

but act within a system centered around the ownership of land, and specifically the land you live on. This model has only truly come into its own in the last few decades, as neoliberalism has reshaped our political and economic landscapes to the point where the government or any public service is generally seen as secondary, and perhaps even unnecessary. This model aims to include almost exclusively private property, assuming “a unitary, solitary, and identifiable owner” whose rights are clearly defined by the borders that separate them from non-owners as they wish.¹¹²



Detroit.
(2016)

¹¹² Nicholas Blomley, *Unsettling the City: Urban Land and the Politics of Property* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2003), 2.

The homeownership model in this sense acts as an extension of the greater hierarchy of ownership, social ranking based on individual private capital accumulation. Today, enforced through our own property law, the individual's property rights supercede both the non-owner's and state's rights or wishes, and must be protected under any cost,¹¹³ socially alienating renters, public housing tenants, and the homeless. Most importantly, the homeownership presents itself and its understandings of property as "fixed, natural, and objective," establishing a pre-political identity that is more inherent than inculcated.

Finally, the family home structure through which property law is built and administered establishes a distinct bias toward the property owner in most cases. Our identity, intertwined with homeownership and the American values surrounding it, sways favor toward the owner and the protection of their rights, while any other actor is seen as invasive, suspicious, and un-American.¹¹⁴ Further, the very same private property rights are bestowed under property law to corporations as essentially propertied individuals. The homeownership model thus establishes the land owner, whether a family or a business conglomerate, as a protector of not only their own property rights but the very value of ownership found deeply rooted in the American psyche.

HOMOGENIZATION OF THOUGHT

As some properties are not legally or socially accepted, only certain people are recognized as viable owners. And often, untraditional ownership models are inhabited or established by 'untraditional' homeowners. Squatting, coop communities, and other collective

¹¹³ Blomley, 4.

¹¹⁴ Blomley, 6.

living scenarios are either an act of protest or a last resort for those who occupy and operate the space, who have previously been rejected by the ownership model as undesired owners, those not worthy, *non-citizens*.

Alternatives, examples of *common property*, are consistently ignored and erased from public conversation or memory. When common property is included, it is described as a defective system remaining only within the poor communities of Communist countries such as Cuba or North Korea.¹¹⁵ Capitalism, a proponent of competition and competitive itself, naturally presents itself as singular, “fully realized and self-sufficient,” while the rest, feudalism, socialism or any other “appear as residual or marginal moments.”¹¹⁶ Popular arguments claim that common property is internally contradictory, and actually promotes “greed, selfishness, idleness, suspicion and a brooding sense of injustice.”¹¹⁷ Ironically, these are outcomes most associated with our current ownership model, a capitalist framework centering entirely on the right of the individual. In fact, as we have discussed previously in other respects, the preservation of our ownership model is very much dependent on a common misreading and stigmatization of alternative property models rejecting capitalist individualism. As long as the common property model is left hidden and misunderstood, few if any will support it as a legitimate opposition to the current model.

The ownership model rejects other models on its own standards of definition and legitimacy. For example, as discussed in chapter one, indigenous land use and property systems were discredited due to their lack of boundaries or clear ownership. European settlers “took as given that enclosing, fencing, house construction and agricultural activity were clear acts that

¹¹⁵ Blomley, 8.

¹¹⁶ Blomley, 9.

¹¹⁷ Blomley, 8.

signaled private ownership.¹¹⁸ Since indigenous property models did not fit these definitions, they were practically invisible, absent of spatial markers and thus “taken as empirical proof that native people had no claim to land.”¹¹⁹ To settlers, this was a continent of millions of squatters waiting for displacement. Such ignorant assumptions of the universality of European property models allowed settler colonialism to act so swiftly and so innocently, not just in the United States but across the globe over centuries of European colonial campaigns. Enacted in the settling of the eastern United States, the same ideology was employed during western colonial expansion. Manifest Destiny took hold of settlers hearts and minds, displaying unapologetically clear connotations of divine right in the seizing of massive plots of land upon first sight.

I would like to acknowledge that there is much to be discussed on the topic of indigenous land seizure in this country over generations, continuing today. Discussions on this topic are deep and complex, and I feel that attempting to enter that discussion without providing a full analysis and commitment is unjust and continues the same erasure I speak of. So I will not attempt to do so, however certain points regarding colonial behavior in this country are very much relevant to the topic of this paper. I wrote on settler colonialism in chapter one, and I mention indigenous land abuse here as well.

To continue my latter point regarding the erasure of indigenous property systems, we see this oppression continuing today through the federal designation of indigenous reservations allotted to certain tribes across certain regions of the United States. While concepts of private or public ownership are not explicitly imposed onto these lands, they are thus still left out of the ownership model and their right to the land they live on is further invalidated and intentionally

¹¹⁸ Blomley, 9.

¹¹⁹ Blomley, 9.

forgotten. The politics of reservation land is something I know little about, but it is clear that failure to acknowledge indigenous property claims continues today to further oppress indigenous tribes and peoples, as well as the cultures they carry.

PRIVATE PROPERTY, CRITICALLY

As we now know, our absolute property model structures itself around the capitalist definition of the individual and private ownership that individual claims. When we think of private property, we most likely think of the single family home, within a suburban landscape, owned by the family inhabiting it. While this is only a facet of private property, which contains ideologically and legally corporate property, it is a vastly common model of property, specifically *home* property. This kind of property makes up most of Detroit, a trait not uncommon among American cities, but a significantly extreme case here.

The housing landscape of Detroit is one that gained the interest of Sara Safransky, who in her essay “Rethinking the Land Struggle in the Postcolonial City,” lays out her theoretical explorations in three parts, geared toward the particular situation of Detroit today. First, she asserts that “private property is not a thing but a bundle of *negotiated* social political, legal, and economic relationships that confer value through exclusion.”¹²⁰ Much of the power (and attractiveness) of private property comes from its physical, tangible borders, marking clearly the threshold between one property and another. When we think of property we think of land split into rectangular lots allocating ownership. Yet property, as a transferable commodity denoted by abstracted methods of exchange and value, is more a social creation than a physical one. While

¹²⁰ Safransky, 1086.

the land is inherently fixed, the perceived static nature of property requires constant and often violent reinforcement.

Second, capitalist property is “subject forming. Not only do we make property, property makes us.”¹²¹ As we have discussed, property acquisition is for many Americans a representation of the Dream they have been chasing their whole lives. The house they finally are able to buy symbolizes the work they have done to get to that point, and thus that property defines them, both internally in the face of greater society. The certainty and clarity of property allows us to easily define where we stand among the rest, and beyond our perception the property we hold very much does embody our social and economic standings. All property in this country requires a certain owner, and thus ensures a certain conformity of the owner, who has now willingly placed themselves into a literal box.

Finally, rooted in capitalism’s value in competition, no one is entitled to property ownership, “demonstrating how land is ‘distinctly unquiet.’”¹²² In its purest form, a neoliberal structure of property ownership would guarantee little to no protection of anyone’s claim to property, requiring a perpetually ongoing conflict over land among all commodities. We clearly live in a world where the government to an extent protects us from losing our most valuable assets, but with consistent government rollback on all sides, our prized property rights are more clearly contradicting the individualism we hold just as high. This inner conflict is what leads to situations like mass homelessness, where those who own property demand protection, yet opt to defund the programs that may work to ensure shelter for others. Through this contradiction is

¹²¹ Safransky, 1086.

¹²² Safransky, 1087.

where we find the exclusionary foundation of our American values of homeownership; property rights are for the propertied, and otherwise you are on your own.

These aspects of property theory are quite visible in the United States, and particularly so in Detroit, where we see assumed rights to land disappear as communities are swept out of their homes to make way for massive redevelopment and a new sought after population. There the political discourse of property allocation and development exists far above the homeowners, who have over generations have been shaped by the property they have claimed. Little do they know that the roots they have planted in the taught security of homeownership can be ripped out of the ground beneath them at any moment, as continuing struggle over surprisingly impermanent property. Safransky claims, “Property is intimately involved in the creation and ordering of racialized bodies, the formation of political subjectivities, our sense of belonging in relationship to one another, and whose lives are valued and whose are not.”¹²³ These homes and these lives are particularly precarious because they are Black homes and Black lives. This sudden and violent uprooting could happen to anyone, but it is happening now to Black Detroit because the city does not want them anymore, and now has the opportunity to replace them.

RACIALIZING LAND

In Chapter II and IV, I gave a history of homebuilding in the United States and its purposes in distinguishing between the worthy and unworthy, the civilized and the savage, the citizen and the non-citizen. Most particularly, this distinction has been and continues to be made along racial lines, not only determining who should own property, but reinforcing Whiteness as

¹²³ Safransky, 1086.

an essential property in itself. In *Whiteness as Property*, Cheryl Harris lays out the process in which Whiteness has come to exist as an owned quality recognized in our capitalist system as benefiting its owner a variety of privileges, just as any conventional property would as well.

Originally, interactions between property and race defined and perpetuated racial oppression, as “only White possession and occupation of land was validated and therefore privileged as a basis for property rights.”¹²⁴ Race becomes a constructed form of property just as land was, delineating ambiguous borders granting privileges to some and marginalizing and oppressing others. Whiteness acts as a marker for the deserving of property, and a property in itself, while Blackness assumes the role of someone else’s property, and the inability to acquire property for oneself.

Yet it was not just Blackness that was tagged as undeserving of property. During European settlement, before the Atlantic slave trade, North America necessarily was deemed as uninhabited, or at least unsettled, in order to justify such a swift claim over the continent. Indigenous land, clearly populated, was labeled as *terra nullius*, or a land of none, void of any European markers of land use or ownership. The universality of European property theory extended itself onto the newly discovered territory, and accordingly this land seemed “untilled and unmarked by human hands,” and thus up for the taking.¹²⁵ At the time of conquest, settlers embraced Locke’s property theory, in which land naturally belongs to those who work it, because “it affirmed the right of the New World settlers to settle on an acquire the frontier. It confirmed and ratified their experience.”¹²⁶ European colonists, recognizing only their own forms of land work (agriculture, homebuilding, etc.), appropriated Locke’s view of land

¹²⁴ Cheryl Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1716.

¹²⁵ Harris, 1721.

¹²⁶ Harris, 1728.

ownership through work to justify their seizing of land clearly already inhabited by other people. Colonists did not have a problem identifying Indigenous existence on this new land; they saw these people, and denied them any right to land through selected creeds of natural property law.

The difference instituted here between those holding Whiteness and those without, is a clear “phantom objectivity,”¹²⁷ a thing on its own that is supposedly clearly defined and permanently distributed. This specific relation is objectified into its own autonomous body, reinforcing its existence as pseudo-physical, more like property than a constructed social factor. Thus, since Whiteness is characterized as any other form of property, the owner is due their private rights of Whiteness. The independence asserted in private land property must also then be attributed to Whiteness, free to be employed as the owner so chooses, while thoroughly protected by the state. As a homeowner rightly expects the government to protect their rights, the owner of Whiteness demands protection of their rights of privilege and supremacy.

Ultimately, Whiteness has come to be defined as a gift, a tangible asset valued by the rights it can be exchanged for. Of these rights, the most central is the right to exclude; like any other commodity, its value is inherently rooted in its selectivity, the absence of its ownership by most people. Just as property itself, whose importance rests on the disadvantage of the renter or the homeless, Whiteness is defined by its own definitions of Blackness, Indigenuousness, and the intentional erasure or ignorance of alternative forms of ‘property.’ This lack of inherent unification among Whiteness is best illustrated in the time of the Great Migration. In cities like Detroit, which previously were almost entirely inhabited by White ethnic immigrants, inter-ethnic violence tore urban landscapes into strictly defined ethnic enclaves. But when Black

¹²⁷ Harris, 1730.

workers migrated from the South into the industrialized Midwest and Northeast, something changed. When faced with the threat of Blackness, White ethnic populations suddenly more or less abandoned their ethnic differences for a White identity unified against the new Black population. In this case, we see realities of social interaction before and after the need to implement Whiteness as property. Clearly, before the presence of a non-White population did not lack social segregation and identity-based violence; *how* White an ethnic group was would often be constructed to distinguish access to rights or resources among a select group. But once faced with an outside presence, the fundamental weight of Whiteness as property is revealed as the dominant means of dehumanization.

ONTOLOGICAL PRACTICE

Here it is important to expand on the notion that under the homeownership model, or more generally the White capitalist conception of property, it is inherently necessary to reject or neglect any other form of property, especially those which contradict the formations of our own property theory. Our denial of other markers of living, of any sense of Indigenous right to at the very least exist on the land they inhabited before settler colonialism, is a pivotal tool in the perpetuation of our property and privilege system. Moreover, our conception of property, as it defines how we see ourselves in relation to land, plays a large influence on our sense of self, as individuals and as communities, and more generally how we exist in the world. This can be described, as Bradley Bryan does, as an ontology, an ideology of being and existing in relation to everything else.

As we have discussed before, property in reality is nothing more than a set of relationships, agreements between people based in social constructions of ownership and exchange.¹²⁸ In this sense, property leaves the realm of the physical and the objective and enters an abstracted realm of nationally agreed upon thought. But more than this, “‘Property’ signifies something about our ontological states as beings in the world by providing qualitative indicia of the way we relate to it,”¹²⁹ helping to shed light on our broader state of being, or ontology. Not only does our conception of property signify our collective ontology of a certain time, but how it has evolved over time.

It is safe to say that our conception of property has abandoned Locke’s utilitarian view; we no longer base ownership or value of land on who has “worked” the soil, and to what extent. Our relation to the land is no longer founded in “any real understanding of moral obligation or foundational sense of duty.”¹³⁰ Our ontology has changed with the uprising of a neoliberal agenda, one based entirely in investment, speculation, and exchange. The “web of meaningful activities deriving their structure from the nature of things in general”¹³¹ has been replaced by the necessity to extract as much capital from every sense of property as possible. We find ourselves in a balance between pure commodification and instilled sentiment, where most families consider property both a financial asset and a piece of identity. I would not say our ontology has become entirely monetized, at least outside of the financial sector. The idea of homeownership, however, is and has always been fundamentally rooted in the assumption that the land we purchase is meant to be owned. We regard our exchanges as arguably a divine transformation of

¹²⁸ Bradley Bryan, “Property as Ontology: On Aboriginal and English Understandings of Ownership,” *Canadian Journal of Law and Jurisprudence* 8, no. 1 (2000): 4.

¹²⁹ Bryan, 4.

¹³⁰ Bryan, 14.

¹³¹ Bryan, 15.

the land itself, that a purchase of a parcel is not only acknowledged by the bank and your neighbors, but by nature itself.

This is where the concept of property as ontology becomes most precarious, not in the relation between people, but between an owner and their land. This assumed role is one that has been indoctrinated into the psyche of every person arriving on this continent, assimilating any previous notions of land, and thus has done a good job of erasing them. The easiest cases to observe as differing from our model are the Indigenous land relationships existing both before colonization and persisting today in many reservation communities. These methods vary widely across North America, but the general ontological structure indicates no sense of ownership, almost as an antithesis to the framework.¹³² Further, universal interchangeability among things enabled by our currency is not present, let alone acts as a central facet of interpreting land.

We may have difficulty understanding these alternative ontological structures, but we can still expose ourselves to a restructuring of thought that can efficiently confront many of the issues we see today enforced by our constructions of property and homeownership. Yet seeing as these are fundamentally in conflict with what we already know, this process is not easy or arguably in some aspects even possible. Instead of focusing on the difficulties inherent in these transitions of thought, we must learn to appreciate it as a symbol of change, and change for the better.

¹³² Bryan, 27.

5. DETROIT

PART II

Detroit is not only important because of its past, but its potential future. The landscape of today's Detroit is seen through many lenses, some good and some bad, but all focused on the opportunity that lies there. So much vacant land in such a historically and culturally rich city is not to be ignored by anyone. Detroit will inevitably rise again, as we have seen over the past few years. The population has plateaued, as the number of people leaving no longer outweighs those entering.¹³³ The question now is, who are these people, and what will the rise of Detroit look like?



Left: Carlos Nielbock¹³⁴ on top of his handcrafted vertical garden (2016)

¹³³ From interview with Lisa Johanon of Central Detroit Christian.

¹³⁴ See <http://canarts.portfoliobox.io/>.

For many, and rightfully so, the perceived cusp of transformation is both exciting and daunting. New investment, in whatever form it may take, is generally regarded as positive, but a growing trend of urban social shifts leads many to believe it is not so straightforward. While much of the city has remained rather untouched by new investment, the transformations seen in Downtown and Midtown serve as an omen of what is to come. Detroit's massive land area leaves this outgrowth of development slowly moving, but as we have seen in the case of Hantz Farms, beginnings of attention are spreading to farther neighborhoods of the city.

The balance between acceptance of external investment and internal protection is one navigated differently by everyone. While some organizations invite the investment as beneficial, some are more cautious, and others would rather opt for modes of self-sufficiency. In returning to Detroit, I hoped to pursue a more targeted understanding of how the city's people are confronting these changes, and how much hope there is for a better future. I was able to meet with several organizations and individuals involved to some capacity with the politics of Detroit's present and future, all with a pivot toward housing, as seems inherent to the discussion. I learned of a few different perspectives, which I will share in the hopes of gathering a more cohesive perception of the city, my own ideas around how to move forward, and perhaps some hope of my own.

CENTRAL DETROIT CHRISTIAN

23 years ago, Central Detroit Christian (CDC) began as a youth programming faith-based organization by Lisa Johanon. The non-profit is based in the Boston-Edison and Virginia Park neighborhood of Detroit, just northwest of Midtown. About five years into its existence, CDC

began a housing development campaign, looking at a local 24 block area. Before the housing market crash, the area had 27 vacant houses, but that shot to 103 in 2009. Since then, CDC has been able to bring that number back down to about 27, with the help of a federal grant of \$5.5 million. CDC operates around 23 homes in the area, with repair and rehab projects as well. In this process, the Lisa and her staff sought to not only stabilize the neighborhood, but to bring back the same people who were forced to leave. This consistency has gained Lisa and CDC trust among the local residents, and effectively rooted them in the grassroots resistance of the area.

Lisa admits she understands that this is very much a racial issue, but positions race second to class in orienting her work. “I’m not as concerned about skin color as I am about protecting the dignity of the poor,” says Lisa, whose work is driven significantly by her faith and the faith of the organization, serving the poor as a responsibility. Since the beginning of CDC’s work, the Black population of the area has dropped from 94 percent to 88. “It’s still 88 percent,” says Lisa, acknowledging the citywide drop as not necessarily a detrimental statistic. The city now is 80 percent Black, which is certainly still a majority; for Lisa, “If you’re fifty percent below median income... and you’re purple, come on down.” A goal of CDC is still to ensure that people are not being directly displaced, but with so much vacant land, they do not see gentrification as the same threat it is in much denser cities like New York.

However, Lisa is well aware of the developer pressure put on the area. The underlying goal is to buy up as much property as possible in order to prevent certain development or speculation that could threaten current residents. Lisa believes “it’s not if, it’s when” will developers seek out strategic properties in Boston-Edison. A week before we spoke, one developer bought two adjacent lots on one corner within the 24 blocks for \$90 thousand after a

65 thousand asking price. With close proximity to the quickly rejuvenating Woodward Avenue, she hopes to build an apartment building, but Lisa says the footprint is too small, and is not worried about it.



Above: The Urban Hope Community Garden, run by Central Detroit Christian. (2017)

Lisa understands well the benefits of homeownership as opposed to renting. “If people look like owners and act like owners, your neighborhood looks nicer, right?” CDC promoted homeownership for years, but after 2008, credit scores disintegrated, and property taxes skyrocketed, leaving CDC to more effectively own and manage their properties over their tenants. Unfortunately, the rental rates they have, while quite affordable, still miss a critical percentage of the population. The lowest they go is \$450 per month as 30% of income, so tenants have to making at least \$1500 per month to qualify. But for many who are unemployed,

they are only receiving around \$700 per month from their Supplemental Security Income (SSI) checks. According to Lisa, there are 284,000 unemployed adults living in Detroit, do for her, basic employment plays a fundamental role in increasing quality of housing in the city.

Overall, Lisa is hopeful for the future, saying “I can’t get up in the morning if I’m not.” Besides the employment barrier, she sees a stratification of resources that should be more effectively distributed, particularly between different non-profit agencies. She is hesitant to work with large players like Quicken Loans for several reasons. Most obviously, she does not hesitate to point out that it was Dan Gilbert and Quicken Loans that initially sold so many faulty mortgages to people who could not afford them, leading to the crash. “I almost feel like he brought this on so the city could be brought to their knees so he could buy it all up.” Secondly, Lisa has been often ignored in the past, as bigger philanthropic groups overlook CDC’s presence in Boston-Edison. But it has been getting better; Lisa now sees corporations including Quicken Loans reaching out to her about development in the area, including a skate park built by Tony Hawk, which Lisa suggested was not the best use of space or money.

While there are a lot of barriers with their work, Lisa and CDC are undeniably putting people in homes with their community’s interests at heart. Their vision statement, an excerpt from the Bible, reads: “Once again old men and women will be standing on the streets with canes in their hands, telling stories to one another, and children will be playing in the streets. This is what the Lord God Almighty says.”

CASS COMMUNITY SOCIAL SERVICES

Cass United Methodist Church has been working a soup kitchen in Midtown since the 1920s. In 2001, under the leadership of Cass United Methodist's Reverend Faith Fowler, Cass Community Social Services was established, officially unaffiliated with the church. Today, CCSS, located in Dexter-Linwood focuses on housing, food, jobs, and healthcare in Detroit. I had the chance to speak with Kimberly Hudolin, the Deputy Director. In terms of housing, CCSS primarily provides assisted rental options across various housing projects, including multiple apartment buildings, a repurposed hospital annex, a project for men with HIV/AIDS, a shelter for women and kids, and several Winter-only options.

The newest and most innovative project by CCSS is a test phase of 25 tiny homes, located not far from their main office. Currently there are seven completed homes, all occupied by one to two residents, and three more under construction. They are energy efficient, cheap to operate, and the rent is low. The goal of the project is to give people who are low-income or formerly homeless an opportunity to acquire an asset, to own something. After seven years of renting, complete with regular financial management classes, residents will have the opportunity to own their tiny home. The homes are open to anyone, with the exception with those with a criminal sexual history, and the first phase received far more applications than their were tiny homes. Those who were selected have access to daily free lunches, a free clinic, a bicycle lending program, and in the future a neighborhood association. In the future, as more tiny homes are built, and a potential second phase for family-size tiny homes goes underway, Kimberly hopes CCSS will be able to foster community cohesion within the community.



Above: Three of Cass Community's tiny homes. (2017)

Right now, it seems to Kim, eviction prevention and working toward permanent housing situations is the main goal. Under the CCSS model, residents are supported in gaining some stability in their lives that will hopefully continue without the help of the organization. But like Lisa Johanon from Central Detroit Christian, Kim does not see gentrification as a pressing issue, or at least as the cause of the eviction and foreclosure crisis; “There’s still plenty of room in the city for everybody,” says Kim. People are being kicked out of their homes because they cannot afford rents already put in place, or fallen into enough mortgage debt or back taxes that they can no longer stay afloat. While it is not a direct causal factor, gentrification is becoming more and more present in Detroit, and in the future will arguably push home the citywide removal of poor, Black residents driven today primarily by the housing market crash.

Kim recognizes the unequal attention by the city and private investors given to Midtown and Downtown, and hopes to see that spread to more neighborhoods. “They’re sweeping the streets again,” something that should not be seen as a win but unfortunately is. Beyond basic

services, she is welcoming to outside investment in any form; “Whatever business you can attract, bring it in.” She mentions how large corporations are more prone to exploitation of their workforce, or to having less of stake in the community, but also “if Amazon said they were going to build their next big thing here, you’re not going to say no.” So there is a balance, of course, but Kim seems to have a less than cautious sense of trust in big industry to uphold their moral duty. She mentioned that her outlook comes in part out of her former involvement in the government loan to General Motors to prevent bankruptcy, which took me partially off guard. I cannot say whether this anecdote is surprising, but sheds light on the very inherent trust in a certain capitalist narrative that I can say has hardly worked out for Detroit in particular.¹³⁵

Interestingly, Kim’s sympathy did not end with corporate actors; in our discussion of homeownership and renting, she reflected on the low-income landlord situation in the city, but felt obligated to approach the issue from both sides. The abuse of tenants in low-income rental neighborhoods is abundantly clear, but Kim added that “it’s hard to eek out a living on some of these properties” because of irregular payments, the expensive upkeep of often dilapidated buildings, the pressure of extra attention from the city in recent years, and even the “fairly burdensome process” of evicting someone from your property. After just discussing the difficulties of low-income renting for the tenant, and the general housing precarity so much of the city’s population has found itself in, I could not agree with Kim’s outlook. However, I found this telling of a compulsory need to defend the systems in place, and to overlook any opportunity for actual change. Kim wants to make sure that “everybody who lives in the city can feel like

¹³⁵ This is to reference Detroit’s history with big industry. As we have seen, dependence on national and international corporations for massive portions of the population comes with profound precarity. There is nothing in our legal system or even our capitalists code of ethics that prohibits the abandonment of Detroit for cheaper labor. It arguably encourages it.

they're participating in the comeback," but to me that statement contradicts itself. The comeback is a return to the old way, a recovery without any radical alterations, just an update of the same program. And if that program at its core is designed to settle land for some and seize land from others, then how will Detroit's poor, evicted, and homeless participate?

JEFFERSON EAST INC.

I was able to get coffee with Josh, who just finished a three-year fellowship with Jefferson East Inc., a non-profit working in the East Jefferson Corridor, comprised of several neighborhoods along the Detroit River east of Downtown. Josh, a practicing architect, worked on safety and stabilization in the Jefferson-Chalmers (also home to 'Coffee and _____') neighborhood with a focus on development without displacement. East Jefferson Avenue is one of the few business corridors left outside of Downtown and Midtown, and Jefferson East Inc. is determined to revive the avenue while maintaining its Black-owned business and Black-centric arts and culture.

Formed in 1994, Jefferson East Inc. (JEI) works to "create pathways of opportunity for Detroit residents and businesses,"¹³⁶ by linking existing business to resources and promoting small business development and local employment. In addition to their business support, JEI also focuses on residential communities, , seeking to help neighborhoods thrive through the use of "proactive homeownership models" and housing services. While the JEI site is not clear on what these models look like, they mention that they work to provide 0 percent interest home

¹³⁶ See <https://jeffersoneast.org>.

repair loans, financial literacy and education services, property tax assistance and foreclosure prevention, and mortgage delinquency and prevention.”¹³⁷

Similar to Cass Community and Central Detroit Christian, JEI has sought to mend community disintegration and housing inaccessibility through non-profit work. While they do not focus on housing construction and management specifically, JEI aims to redirect resources into communities that have lacked any constructive attention for decades, especially economically independent and Black-owned business districts. However, JEI seems to face the same problems as Cass Community and CDC, in that much of their work is reactionary, aiming to fill holes already made without directing focus at what is making those holes in the first place. JEI and other non-profits also seem to be walking a very precarious line between economic development and the dangerous attraction of outside investors. In preventing gentrification, explicitly investing in the existing community is pivotal, and while these organizations have this in mind, it is hard to say what the future holds for Cass, Boston-Edison, or Jefferson-Chalmers.

TRUMBULLPLEX

Not knowing much about the collective, I decided to visit during one of their open mic nights, hoping to get a sense of what the place was about. When I got there, I quickly came to understand what kind of place Trumbullplex was and is. I got there just before the performances started, and managed to sit down with Patience, a vocal member of the house who seemed to be willing to talk. But about a minute into our conversation, she said the open mic was starting, and

¹³⁷ See <https://jeffersoneast.org>.

that she was hosting and performing. While I was not able to interview Patience, I listened to her performance, a set of slam-esque poems translating frustrations with family and life.

It is safe to say this was very much a White space. There were certainly expressions of resistance against gender and sexuality norms, the boundaries of the binary, but when race was mentioned in passing it was tangential, a broad reference to the racism of one's parents or something similar. For most of the night I was able to talk to Ryan, a relatively new member of the collective who was very enthusiastic to speak and share the message of *Trumbullplex*.

Ryan was born in Southfield, a suburb of Detroit, but says that he has spent enough time in the city to say he's from Detroit. He got involved in *Trumbullplex* about a year before we spoke, hearing of the collective through friends and the underground punk scene. This, says Ryan, is where *Trumbullplex* has its roots, the underground punk and metal music scene of Detroit. These origins, while not as present today, say a lot about the collective. The space is huge, comprised of two massive houses and a connecting structure, the performance space containing the open mic. During the 1970s, the house became an informal gathering space for local musicians and artists, a trend which lasted until the early 90s, when a group of friends bought the house and registered it as an official non-profit. The official basis of the non-profit side of *Trumbullplex* is a bit confusing, but for the most part the collective seems to have been centered around underground music. According to Ryan, the space used to hold weekly concerts of Ska, metal, and punk-rock, with attendants blacking out and banging heads against the wall, without any clear political motivation.

Since then things have changed a bit. About 6 years ago Ryan says *Trumbullplex* hit its political peak, with a strong agenda combatting police and the government, but today things are

more “laid back.” Trumbullplex identifies itself as an “anarchist housing collective and art space” aiming “to provide a space for artists, activists, educators, neighbors, and more to come together and share art and ideas to combat all forms of oppression.”¹³⁸ It seems the identity of Trumbullplex most centers around anarchism, resisting “the system” in general and endorsing “community, looking for each other, sharing, and just saying a big fuck you to the government.” Members are anti-capitalist and promote a self-sustaining lifestyle. There is a garden in the backyard, and everyone brings a different skill set to the house. There is a cost for living in Trumbullplex, but Ryan says it is pretty low.

While the collective has certainly fleshed out their anarchist beliefs, and a supposed focus around “all forms of oppression,” there seems to be no concrete programming or initiative to combat these things outside of the complex itself. Ryan does not know of any organized action that happens outside of the two houses, but presents Trumbullplex as more of a space to be used by organizations and artists who align themselves with their anarchist thought. However, Ryan does not think the Trumbullplex is very replicable; in fact, he says that a large part of the collective’s sustained existence is the relative stability of the surrounding neighborhood of Woodbridge, a historical district. He says that in areas like the North Side, where crime rates and other statistics are much higher, collectives like Trumbullplex cannot survive, having something to do with how nice people are, public safety, and things of that nature.

Trumbullplex certainly succeeds in dismantling certain indoctrinated thoughts around property and homeownership, and in fact opts to resist most of society in general. But beyond talk, it is hard to find where the collective succeeds in tangible action, or any follow through on

¹³⁸ See <https://trumbullplex.org>.

their apparent concerns for those less fortunate than themselves. Above all else it seems to me that Trumbullplex lacks self-reflection, or how their own Whiteness, and what essentially adds up to an artistic expression, does not quite connect with a greater resistance outside of their own walls. They seem to be more concerned with individually living off the grid than protecting the livelihoods of their fellow Detroiters. I can see how aspects of Trumbullplex, their egalitarianism and rejection of preconceptions of propertyship, are helpful in understanding possible manifestations of living alternatives. But beyond that I do not see Trumbullplex as exemplary.

SHEA

Shea Howell is one of the two people I had met in Detroit during my class trip with whom I was able to reconnect the second time around. Shea is a community advocate and organizer affiliated with the Grace Lee Boggs Center, and has been living and working in Detroit since 1973. Grace Lee Boggs was a civil rights activist with a prominent role in Detroit during its most heated years, particularly as an organizer of the Detroit Walk to Freedom of 1963, which was attended by Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and directly preceded his famous protest in Washington. The Center was the focal point of my first visit to Detroit, functioning as an anchor grounding my class in Detroit's activist community. The Center plays an important role in connecting other organizations across the city in solidarity with one another, and has continued to promote resistance work and alternative living through their widely circulated newsletter and projects like New Work New Culture. This campaign addresses the shift in labor force from mainly manufacturing to mainly technology and service, and how working class Detroiters will

continue to make a living. Through access to education and different training opportunities, New Work New Culture works to adapt the population to the new work environment.

This is one example of how the Boggs Center is exploring alternative forms of living promoting sustainability and community, and Shea is at the center of it. Shea sees the necessity of this exploration, recognizing the precarious position of much of Detroit's residents, seemingly coming from all sides. In addition to job insecurity, food deserts, and other major topics, Shea talks about the housing landscape as a very problematic one. The majority are large, in disrepair, and emblematic of the ownership-renting racial dichotomy, "a sorted history in this country." Detroit once had the largest population of Black single-family homeowners in the United States, and still holds that legacy closely, but has since seen the effect of the 2008 crash. According to Shea, there were 36,000 homes up for auction in 2017. Domestically and from overseas people are buying up cheap land in Detroit and letting it sit there; rent-control is hardly enforced; mixed-income strategies are rare. Foreclosure and eviction have crushed the American Dreams of Black Detroiters, who have now been put in a situation where they essentially either innovate or move.

Many neighborhoods are doing what they can to survive, like housing multiple families in single family homes, and even setting up community gardens. This is where new education comes into play for Shea, who says, "A lot of the effort to restore community begins with restoring houses," an endeavor that requires certain skills when the city has already abandoned your community. People are today restoring abandoned houses on their blocks, transforming them into community spaces, childcare houses, and a general asset to the neighborhood. Community land trusts are cropping up in Detroit as a manageable solution to maintaining the

housing stock and local ownership of a block, while reorienting our conception of land slightly from an individual property to a collective asset and responsibility. Questions Shea brings up are: “How do we think of housing as community building rather than community destroying?” “how do we push things in a more collaborative, cooperative, less exploitative direction?” and “how do we do non-reformist reforms?”

In one case Shea mentioned, 25 houses all more or less adjacent to one another were in foreclosure a few years ago. In a drastic effort, \$120,000 was crowdsourced in order to buy back 22 of the 25 homes and deed them back to the people living there as a land trust. While the houses were given back to residents, the land itself remained as property held by the trust itself. While residents were tentative, they would rather pursue a land trust than be evicted. This type of action promoted collectivity, benefited the community, and was successful.

When I asked Shea about housing alternatives, she is very supportive of any sort of “visionary organizing” people can create in their lives, but rightly questions its ultimate viability in the tight constraints of our system, particularly for those of low income. Property, even in its negativities, can provide stability, ultimately promotes a sense of neighborhood investment and responsibility, and is far better in many respects than renting. But according to citywide community planning campaign conducted by then-mayor Dennis Archer in the 1990s, residents expressed a clear attraction to more community-centered, small scale planning. They advocated for neighborhood schools, locally owned stores, recreation and green space within walking distance, and more economic and racial integration. This is kind of neighborhood-level thinking reflects the same sentiments that contemporary Detroit’s housing activism does—centering the

community, block by block, as an organism in itself that is worth more than any citywide economic investment.

So what does Shea think about the future? She is hopeful. It is pretty clear at this point that land as a source of property is “a really bad idea” and “doesn’t lead to a good way of living.” Those questions mentioned before, particularly how to create non-reformist reforms, are at the front of Shea’s mind. This is to say that we should be focusing on the small abolitionist¹³⁹ actions that are possible, beginning to care about the land again and relearning how to become self-sustaining, or at least how to localize, in the current era. “If we think about developments of people, protection of land and water, and relationships as the primary core of how we approach housing, that’s a different way of thinking.” Caring about each other and the land we are on, that is replicable.

WAYNE

I first met Wayne Curtis in the spring of 2016, when he showed my college class around his block, the sites of *Freedom Freedom*, his primary project at the time. He made a strong impression on me then, and I thought he would be an important person to talk to during this project. I made contact once again, and finally had the chance to sit down with him just before I left Detroit. We spoke at the Cass Commons community center (where I had previously stayed during my class trip), along with Wayne’s friend and colleague Darryl, for about four hours straight. We covered every topic imaginable, which was somehow expected from someone like

¹³⁹ I mention abolitionism here as a revolutionary mode of thought that looks past reformism as insufficient and complacent. I will speak further on this subject in the REFLECTIONS chapter.

Wayne, who could speak and teach endlessly, seemingly get more engaged and more excited as we traveled down each rabbit hole. My time with Wayne was a clear highlight of my trip back to Detroit and of this project more generally, and I feel like I have only scratched the surface of what he sees in the world and in the future. I want to share what I learned, hoping that it can help to both guide and invigorate our collective approach to the future, and to our relationship to the land and each other.



Left: Wayne. (2016)

Wayne has lived an eventful life thus far. He grew up in Detroit with not much appreciation for the school system or what was expected of him. He fought in Vietnam, and it

was there that he was first politicized; seeing the violence and corruption of that war first hand allowed him to question not only the motives of the US government but the motives of American culture. When he returned home, he found further education and awakening in the emerging Black Panther Party, who fully radicalized Wayne, without which Wayne believes he would not be here today. He watched as the Party united White and Black workers in Chicago, something unimaginable for Wayne. He witnessed the work of Jeff Fort, who still incarcerated today. “If they had just kept selling reefer and shooting, it would’ve been alright,” Darryl says. “But after they began to be politicized then they became a big threat.” The Party would continue to raise Wayne’s consciousness throughout his life, setting a foundation for this radical thought and collectivist, abolitionist practice.

In the 1950s, Detroit had 1.8 million people; in 2000, about one million; in 2010, 713,000; and in 2016, 673,000. It has been over time one of the largest (if not the largest) US city with a majority of single-family, freestanding homes. Its large Black homeownership population has been equalled by a growing low-income Black renter base, mostly living on the property of White owners who at one point left the city themselves but kept ownership of the land. The 80 percent Black population is significant, but in know says who owns the city, and who the city belongs to. The Detroit government is now fixing the entire infrastructure of Midtown and Downtown, while the rest of the city is left with bursting pipes, unclean water, electricity shortages, and countless power shutoffs. As we have seen in Flint,¹⁴⁰ the privatization of basic human resources can end in destruction and death.

¹⁴⁰ Merrit Kennedy, “Lead-Laced Water in Flint: A Step-by-Step Look at the Makings of a Crisis,” NPR (April 20, 2016), <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/04/20/465545378/lead-laced-water-in-flint-a-step-by-step-look-at-the-makings-of-a-crisis>.

Freedom Freedom, in Wayne's eyes, just started as a means of feeding people, of surviving in a food desert with no outside assistance. Then ideology was out of the picture; what mattered was finding a way to put food on the table, not just for Wayne but for his community. From there, "Grow a garden, grow a community" sprouted, and the *Freedom* component came soon after. Wayne began branching into education and art, discussion and sharing of information, and the idea of reclaiming your neighborhood "as your own and not the city's, and act accordingly." As the organization grew (literally), surviving became self-sustaining, then reclaiming, and finally freedom. Wayne was able to use local urban farming as a means of practicing collectivism, rooted in basic survival tactics when the structures around you collapse. "Back when I was growing up, we was going to school so we could get away from the dirt," says Darryl. Now he speaks of Malik Yakini, D-Town Farm, the Nsoroma School,¹⁴¹ and the natural intersections between education and land, and the symbiosis between the two.

A lot of people in Detroit are still hoping that things will go back to the way they used to be, the jobs will suddenly return and the city will thrive once more. Wayne and Darryl don't see that happening, and don't want it to. There are some things that you just don't question, that you believe are inherent part of life, but they aren't. "People are happy like how they said the slaves were happy on the plantation," says Wayne. For the city, money is not the issue; they are being very intentional about where it goes. The city is willing to build a new Red Wings arena with taxpayer money, and the franchise still owes the city thousands of dollars. Meanwhile, Wayne was recently threatened to have his power cut off over \$1.75.

¹⁴¹ See <http://oacesdetroit.tripod.com/id11.html>.



Left: Wayne outside of the Freedom Freedom project. (2016)

“Private property is the privatization of life, period,” says Wayne, and we buy into it without even realizing. He gives an example from when he was homeless, and would frequently pass grocery stores with mountains of fresh produce outside the entryway. He would stand, starving, a few feet away from so much food, but in no way be able to eat even one apple. Wayne is well aware that it would not necessarily go smoothly if anyone could take what they want for free, but it questions qualities of our structure that may not be so convincing. Anarchy is not the only alternative, but our system is only ever placed against the opposite extreme.

Wayne calls this syllogism, the creating of a false set of premises contingent only on each other. In this case, if Wayne took an apple it would be stealing, and since every instance of stealing requires punishment, then Wayne must be punished. But what if Wayne's action was not regarded as stealing, but as an act of individual survival? Is that automatically deserving of punishment, or criminalization, or incarceration?

The struggles Wayne has faced himself and witnessed in his community have brought him to a mentality he calls "iamWE." In countless circumstances we all call on each other for help, and recognizing this as a pivotal part of society is what Wayne preaches—valuing sharing, love, and a concern for life while confronting racism, capitalism, and anthropocentrism. These are at the root of our society, and subsequently are killing people and our planet, and thus must be uprooted if things are expected to change. This is a big plan, but is actually made up of small, achievable changes, small victories where collectivism may resolve the inconsistency of basic resources in so many of our lives. Wayne gives a brilliant example of this new form of thought, where a squirrel continually comes to his garden to eat his tomatoes. While this may anger Wayne, he recognizes that the squirrel never thinks of those tomatoes as belonging to Wayne, and will eat them no matter what Wayne wants or does. This is a subversion of the entitlement to ownership that comes with our notions of property, and Wayne calls this squirrel "a revolutionary." "We have to think like that."

Wayne wants to entirely replace our economic and political system as we know it, but that is a long term goal. Right now, he is thinking about survival, creating community under the pressures of gentrification, neoliberalism, and the syllogism of our taught ideology. Local businesses which formerly sustained the strength and independence of a community are now lost,

and there is hardly any agency left in neighborhoods across Detroit. But this urgency, this desperation, is what has ignited the fire in people like Wayne, more eager now to collectively organize more than ever. Wayne is educating his community, he is fighting eviction and foreclosure, he is repurposing vacant houses and lots into vibrant community spaces, and he is envisioning a future that works for him, under no indoctrinated preconditions whatsoever.

When we devise ways to stay alive, [we] are more of a threat than Malcolm X. An organization that's keeping you alive and serving people becomes more of a threat than a Viet Cong with a rifle.... All this organization has is the revolutionary consciousness to develop the concern of family, to keep your family alive... and that's a dangerous consciousness. - Wayne

HONORABLE MENTIONS

Though I was not able to personally visit these places or converse with their staff, the following to me are exemplary of the kind of revisioning and subversion I have seen sprouting in Detroit. These places and people are reconceptualizing property, ownership, and to an extent their own ontologies; they manifest the kind of action Shea and Wayne speak of, the non-reformist reforms that can ultimately change national narratives.

D-TOWN FARM¹⁴² is an urban farm located in the Rouge Park neighborhood on the far west side of Detroit. The farm was founded in 2008 by the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network in response to the problem of 'food deserts' (lack of proximate access to fresh produce and regular groceries) across predominantly Black neighborhoods in the city. The farm grows produce year-round, contains two beehives, and runs a composting operation, and distributes their food across the city. D-Town Farm is "a site of community-building,

¹⁴² See <https://www.d-townfarm.com>.

collective-identity formation and political action,”¹⁴³ committed to food justice as one path to confront the racial and spatial segregation and disenfranchisement of their community and the Black population of Detroit at large.

THE HOPE DISTRICT¹⁴⁴ is a community initiative on Detroit’s Eastside, established by Mike and Lilly Wimberley to consciously develop the neighborhood into one of sustainability and innovation. The project “eloquently expresses the double bind of wanting to both assist the needy in the world as it is, but also change the world into a more just form,”¹⁴⁵ primarily through the repurposing of vacant lots into spaces of community expression and unification. These lots vary from grassroots markets to urban gardens to places of prayer and art, all with the intention of strengthening the community as a whole and promoting economic independence, all through unconventional, collectivist means.

DALLY IN THE ALLEY¹⁴⁶ began in 1977 as an art fair, but since has evolved into a collective campaign to annually transform unused spaces in the North Cass neighborhood into places of community. The Dally takes the form of a normal fair, with activities, music, art, food, and small pop-up vendors. Momentarily changing alleys and side streets into what are essentially small block parties, the Dally “comprises an adaptive reuse of urban space as a resource for the self-management of a community.”¹⁴⁷ Proceeds are directed toward nighttime security, snow plowing in the winter, soup kitchens, community gardens, and whatever seems important to support at the time. The Dally has even supported legal action to protect the

¹⁴³ Andrew Herscher, *The Unreal Estate Guide to Detroit* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Digital Culture Books, 2012), 45.

¹⁴⁴ See <http://friendsofdetroit.org>.

¹⁴⁵ Herscher, 74.

¹⁴⁶ See <https://dallyinthealley.com>.

¹⁴⁷ Herscher, 162.

neighborhood against potentially harmful policy. This type of community action can be replicable anywhere there is neglected public space, unifying a community while both supporting internal exchange and art and fighting against any outside threat.

FARNSWORTH STREET¹⁴⁸ is the brainchild of Paul Weertz, who first started buying land on the Eastside of Detroit in the mid-1980s. While teaching at the remarkable Catherine Ferguson Academy,¹⁴⁹ Paul saw opportunity to apply his agricultural skills to the prairies of Detroit's more vacant areas. Paul's block is on Farnsworth and Moran in the Poletown East neighborhood, just east of Midtown. After rehabbing his own house and moving in, he acquired several other properties, some with abandoned houses and others with nothing at all, and started renting them out to other families. He quickly started to farm the vacant lots, and the success of the block in amongst a depopulating neighborhood attracted more to join Paul in his project. Farnsworth Street is still in operation, growing a host of produce consumed by the community and distributed across the city. The block is the only one of its kind in the area, perfectly maintained as a vibrant, thriving community. It is true that "Farnsworth Street would be impossible without the availability of unreal¹⁵⁰ estate on and around that street, not only for farming but also for the accomodation of farmers in close proximity," but vacant land is not lacking in other parts of Detroit. Paul and his work are exemplary of what can happen when a

¹⁴⁸ There is no reliable online link for the Farnsworth project.

¹⁴⁹ Catherine Ferguson Academy as a Detroit public school that operated from 1986 until 2014 when it was shut down by Kevin Orr, the city's Emergency Manager at the time. CFA was structured for students who were pregnant, and centered much of its curriculum around agrarian education, with a urban farm on the campus. The school had exceedingly high graduation rates, and to illustrate its success, it is said that on several occasions students would fake being pregnant in order to enroll.

See <http://www.grownindetroitmovie.com/school.php>.

¹⁵⁰ The use of 'unreal' here derives from Herscher's terminology for spaces like these not fitting conventional real estate law or logic.

community uses their own ability and power to revive a block, existing without the city, and in a harmony that is both physically and ideologically natural.

6. REFLECTION

Through this piece, hopefully I have made the point that property is problematic, rooted in racial domination.¹⁵¹ There is no such thing as the objectification of property. Thus our constructions of space and property, taught as impartial law, can be exploited for personal gain. The way we characterize property, land, and ultimately one another “fundamentally misconstrues the nature of culture, the nature of beings, and the way that beings are constituted and related.... There is nothing inherent about property.”¹⁵² Our assumption of property as pre-political allows it to remain unchallenged. We can now begin to understand how pervasive capitalist ideology truly is, how few facets we comfortably question, while so much goes on undetected. This begs the question addressed by Gibson-Graham in their book *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)*:

How can we consider property outside of the limitations insisted on by capitalist hegemony? How can our collective recognition of the artificial homogenization of property law allow us to restructure how we interact with the land below us, what we build, and what values are carrying out new homes?¹⁵³

If we can come to the realization that property is not natural or divine, we have the freedom to reorient the way we see land, our use of it, and our existence alongside one another. “If we recognize that space is socially produced, and socially productive, we need also to recognize that it can be remade for different social ends.”¹⁵⁴ The realization is only the beginning; we can now see how transgressive our applications of property can truly be.

¹⁵¹ Kinney, 1716.

¹⁵² Bryan, 7.

¹⁵³ J.K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

¹⁵⁴ Blomley, 7.

In this reorientation of thought, it becomes increasingly important that we recognize the privileges that remain in our society. We need to remember that being able to choose for yourself where you live is a privilege of Whiteness. Originally, there was no difference in the built environments of Detroit's oldest suburbs and its working-class neighborhoods; race was the only defining factor of desirability."¹⁵⁵ Racial discrimination still exists, just under more covert methods.¹⁵⁶ And perhaps more impactful than we might think, our sentiments surrounding the home are maintained by "the powerful tug of nostalgic memory that childhood homes represent."¹⁵⁷ "I found my old house in Detroit today" encapsulates this sentiment at its most insidious, but also at its most unfiltered, clear to see.

Pieces of Henri Lefebvre's work resonate strongly today. Basic anthropological needs of people are not being met, calling for an abandonment of the "old humanism" for "a new humanism, a new praxis, another man, that of urban society."¹⁵⁸ Lefebvre is undeniably flawed in his theory, more or less ignoring race as equally important as socioeconomic status. He self-identifies as reformist, but there is truly revolutionary praxis here, something reminiscent of a certain manifesto.¹⁵⁹ He says urban strategy "cannot but depend on the presence and action of the working class, the only one able to put an end to segregation directed essentially against it;"¹⁶⁰ the *new humanism* is *necessarily* grassroots. Lefebvre's thoughts on urban social change and

¹⁵⁵ Kinney, 17.

¹⁵⁶ Wilhelmina Leigh and James Stewart, 23.

¹⁵⁷ Kinney, 21.

¹⁵⁸ Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities* (Hoboken NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996), 150.

¹⁵⁹ See Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (London, UK: Pluto Press, 1996).

¹⁶⁰ Lefebvre, 154.

the *right to the city* are furthered by the work of David Harvey, who connects our universal *right* to the failures of modern capitalism, and the need for a return to *the commons*.¹⁶¹

So what now? It is a difficult question, and not exactly answerable. The subversion of what is definitively our ontology, our conception of existence, can be infinitely tracked to the cruxes of North American colonization into European history and beyond. Perhaps to move forward we must look to other ontologies, particularly those mentioned previously of the Indigenous peoples of North America. Recognizing these communities, before colonization, as entirely separate ontologies is the first step.

The big house and the slave quarters are alive today, maybe not in the same physical form, but as an ideology, and an ontology. Settler colonialism still dictates how our cities transform, how housing develops blindly span across swaths of land. Segregation is still here, and it looks just like it always did. Gentrification may be a relatively new phenomenon, but its roots are as old as this country. Activist Max Rameau explains this as a clear distinction between *surface* and *root* issues. Surface issues are “those which directly and tangibly confront the society and its members, those issues on the surface, to the forefront and in our face.”¹⁶² Segregation, gentrification, even slavery, can be seen as surface issues; they are the manifestations of something deeper. This something deeper is the root issue, the cause of surface issues. Root issues, in the case of the United States, are systemic racism, capitalism, and White Supremacy. As long as these persist, surface issues will inevitably persist despite action to eliminate them. Gentrification arguably replaced racial segregation enforced by law in the Jim Crow South and then in the industrialized North.

¹⁶¹ See David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2013).

¹⁶² Max Rameau, *Take Back the Land* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2012), 53.



A vandalized house, apart of *The Heidelberg Project*.¹⁶³
(2016)

This inevitably is very daunting. But it is important to remember that this in no way invalidates or discounts the work that is done to confront surface issues. These are real, violent phenomena that are literally killing people, and must be continually addressed. This the work that organizations like Cass Community Social Services, Central Detroit Christian, and Jefferson East Inc. are doing right now. The presence of these groups is entirely necessary, but if we look

¹⁶³ See <https://www.heidelberg.org>.

at the bigger picture, do we not theoretically wish for a future in which these groups are not so necessary? This is where the confrontation and dismantling of root issues comes into play, and where we can make the distinction between reformism and abolitionism. While reformism tackles policy issues or providing resources for people in need, abolitionism seeks to end or replace the very systems we know and live in. Non-profit work that focuses on surface issues can generally be considered reformist, while the work and ideology being fostered in the Boggs Center, championed by Shea and Wayne, that is abolitionism. Shea's "non-reformist reforms" are conscious of the limitations of reformism; the reformist action she participates in is driven by an abolitionist agenda, striving toward an eventual dismantling of the root issue.

I believe that in order to move forward outside the confines of our previous ontology, the action we take must be in one way or another abolitionist. By this I mean to say that reformism simply will not cut it. Reformist work will always be important, and in many ways allows room for abolitionist thought and action. But if we are looking at longterm, we must strive to change the systems that perpetuate not only housing inequality but every form of inequality. This means replacing American homeownership and property ontology with something like "iamWe." Community *must* come first.

For me, I am still very much in the process of absorbing and reflecting on what I have learned during this process. Shea's and Wayne's words hold weight as if they were spoken yesterday. My memories of my first time in Detroit are vivid, continually unwinding as I uncover the invisible forces shaping that city, and any other urban landscape in the United States. I have come to the realization that in whatever work I pursue in the future, I must center abolitionism as the ultimate goal. Housing should be a universal right accessible to all, and if the

system we are in now cannot provide that, then we should create one that can. After all, a *house* is just a house, but a *home* can be anything you want it to be.

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